Half in Shadow

Mary Elizabeth Counselman

$8.95

During this day of April 15, three pennies will find their way into the pockets of this city. On each penny there will be a well-defined mark. One is a square; one is a circle; and one is a cross. These three pennies will change hands often, as do all coins, and on the seventh day after this announcement (April 21) the possessor of each marked penny will receive a gift.

To the first: $100,000 in cash.
To the second: A trip around the world.
To the third: Death.

The August 1934 issue of *Weird Tales* featured one of Robert E. Howard's sanguinary Conan sagas, a new Northwest Smith adventure from the pen of C. L. Moore, plus additional material by Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, and other regular contributors to the magazine. Also included in this issue, unobtrusively tucked away at the very rear, was a six-page "filler" that had not even been accorded a spot illustration: "The Three Marked Pennies" by Mary Elizabeth Counselman. Readers were nevertheless fascinated by this profoundly haunting allegory of three marked coins, and Miss Counselman's story would eventually attain a legendary position as one of the most popular works ever to be published during the thirty-one-year history of *Weird Tales*. "The Three Marked Pennies" is now an acknowledged classic of the supernatural, and has been reprinted in anthologies and textbooks of distinguished American short stories.

HALF IN SHADOW reproduces this fabled fantasy by Mary Elizabeth Counselman in a new collection that includes her finest spectral fiction written over a period of thirty-five years. Here are such memorable tales of the Deep South as "The Tree's Wife," with its searingly unforgettable sequence of the marriage between a young mountain girl and her deceased lover beneath the

HALF IN SHADOW

KIRK

HALF IN SHADOW

Mary Elizabeth Counselman

ARKHAM HOUSE ✍ 1978

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To the Deep South

I have been faithful to thee, Cynara!
In my fashion. . . .

ERNEST DOWSON

PREFACE

What is fantasy fiction?

In my creative-writing classes and workshop sessions at various writers' colonies, I have been astonished to find that many widely read people do not understand what it is, despite the use of fantasy by most of our greatest writers: Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton, Cervantes, Scott, Hugo, to name but a few.

Fantasy is man's magic key to the creaking door of that Other World that is the misty, imaginary, spiritual counterpart of what some choose to call "broad daylight" in our workaday experience. It is, perhaps, a poet's-eye-view, but since poets exist and survive and often prosper, there must be something to all that "nonsense," by every rule of our provable science!

Is there such a half-world of dream-fulfillment and magic? Indeed there is! Has always been, and always will be! It was our world's most eminent scientist, Albert Einstein, who said: "Imagination is a nation's greatest natural resource." Wishful thinking is only a blueprint, of course, but the human mind—that marvelous dynamo—can find many ways to follow the blueprint it creates. Every man-made thing we see around us was once just a notion, someone's ideal of how

the perfect chair or table or motorcar or home should be. Then, by our most diligent handicraft, we make it come to pass.

I have been trying to say this in the symbolic language of fantasy fiction written over a period of half a century or more, since my first laughable attempts at the age of six. Unlike Poe, whose actor-parents were killed in a theater fire when he was small, I had a very happy, two-parent childhood—fenced in by logic and discipline, but gilded always, night and day, by adult pretend-games of the Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, and Tooth Fairy variety. My fiction reflects it, along with the books that were read to me: *Puss in Boots, Uncle Remus, Peter Pan, Treasure Island, Tom Sawyer,* the *Just So Stories,* and other fiction, along with the classic myths and the more pensive works of Poe and Coleridge, Longfellow and Wordsworth and Bryant. We *are* what we *read*—and that is fact, not fantasy!

Most of my "ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties" are allies and not enemies of humankind, working to aid my protagonists rather than to sneak up and pounce on them in the darkness. And, like every writer who ever wrote a line, I hope to win friends and influence people by my own way of thinking—even about our most horrifying aspects of living and dying. The Hallowe'en scariness of the bumbling-but-kindly Wizard of Oz has always appealed to me more than the gruesome, morbid fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and those later authors who were influenced by their doom philosophies. My eerie shades bubble with an irrepressible sense of humor, ready to laugh with (never *at*) those earthbound mortals whose fears they once shared. Such was the cheerful philosophy of my closest free-lance confreres of the genre: Seabury Quinn, Greye La Spina, Harold Lawlor, Carl Jacobi, and Ed Price, with our mentors, August Derleth, editor and publisher of Arkham House, and Farnsworth Wright, Dorothy McIlwraith, and Lamont Buchanan of the now-famous magazine, *Weird Tales,* the springboard of so much writing talent that has lived up to their editorial faith.

Fearsome only in that they are not like us, my supernatural beings are helpful to the well intentioned but ruthless to the predatory, as in "The Smiling Face" and "The Monkey Spoons." Many of my

"weirds" bring matters to a violent conclusion, sometimes through their own will to injure, as in "Parasite Mansion" and "Seventh Sister," and in "The Black Stone Statue," whose sculptor demanded push-button fame.

Unlike most pulp magazines of the Golden Era, *Weird Tales* did not insist that the White Hats always win . . . since, unfortunately, they sometimes don't. Thus realistically, many of my characters, both fleshly and skeletal, become hopelessly entangled because of personality clashes and nobody "wins"—as in "A Handful of Silver," "The Green Window," and "The Shot-Tower Ghost." Most popular of this group seem to be "The Tree's Wife" and my oft-reprinted little allegory, "The Three Marked Pennies." It was great fun writing them, and great fun sharing my viewpoint with fellow authors and fantasy aficionados who enjoy, somewhat nervously, peeking at our Shadow Side.

MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

Gadsden, Alabama
11 December 1976

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HALF IN SHADOW

THE THREE MARKED PENNIES

Everyone agreed, after it was over, that the whole thing was the conception of a twisted brain, a game of chess played by a madman—in which the pieces, instead of carved bits of ivory or ebony, were human beings.

It was odd that no one doubted the authenticity of the "contest." The public seems never for a moment to have considered it the prank of a practical joker, or even a publicity stunt. Jeff Haverty, editor of the *News,* advanced a theory that the affair was meant to be a clever, if rather elaborate, psychological experiment—which would end in the revealing of the originator's identity and a big laugh for everyone.

Perhaps it was the glamorous manner of announcement that gave the thing such widespread interest. Branton, the southern town of about thirty thousand people in which the affair occurred, awoke one April morning to find all its trees, telephone poles, house-sides, and storefronts plastered with a strange sign. There were scores of them, written on yellow copy-paper on an ordinary typewriter. The sign read:

"During this day of April 15, three pennies will find their way into the pockets of this city. On each penny there will be a well-defined

mark. One is a square; one is a circle; and one is a cross. These three pennies will change hands often, as do all coins, and on the seventh day after this announcement (April 21) the possessor of each marked penny will receive a gift.

"To the first: $100,000 in cash.

"To the second: A trip around the world.

"To the third: Death.

"The answer to this riddle lies in the marks on the three coins: circle, square, and cross. Which of these symbolizes wealth? Which, travel? Which, death? The answer is not an obvious one.

"To him who finds it and obtains the first penny, $100,000 will be sent without delay. To him who has the second penny, a first-class ticket for the earliest world-touring steamer to sail will be presented. But to the possessor of the third marked coin will be given—death. If you are afraid your penny is the third, give it away—but it may be the first or the second!

"Show your marked penny to the editor of the 'News' on April 21, giving your name and address. He will know nothing of this contest until he reads one of these signs. He is requested to publish the names of the three possessors of the coins April 21, with the mark on the penny each holds.

"It will do no good to mark a coin of your own, as the dates of the true coins will be sent to Editor Haverty."

By noon everyone had read the notice, and the city was buzzing with excitement. Clerks began to examine the contents of cash register drawers. Hands rummaged in pockets and purses. Stores and banks were flooded with customers wanting silver changed to coppers.

Jeff Haverty was the target for a barrage of queries, and his evening edition came with a lengthy editorial embodying all he knew about the mystery, which was exactly nothing. A note had come that morning with the rest of his mail—a note unsigned, and typewritten on the same yellow paper in a plain stamped envelope with the postmark of that city. It said merely: *"Circle—1920. Square—1909. Cross—1928.*

Please do not reveal these dates until after April 21.''

Haverty complied with the request, and played up the story for all it was worth.

The first penny was found in the street by a small boy, who promptly took it to his father. His father, in turn, palmed it off hurriedly on his barber, who gave it in change to a patron before he noted the deep cross cut in the coin's surface.

The patron took it to his wife, who immediately paid it to the grocer. ''It's too long a chance, honey!'' she silenced her mate's protests. ''I don't like the idea of that death-threat in the notice . . . and this certainly must be the third penny. What else could that little cross stand for? Crosses over graves—don't you see the significance?''

And when that explanation was wafted abroad, the cross-marked penny began to change hands with increasing rapidity.

The other two pennies bobbed up before dusk—one marked with a small perfect square, the other with a neat circle.

The square-marked penny was discovered in a slot-machine by the proprietor of the Busy Bee Café. There was no way it could have got there, he reported, mystified and a little frightened. Only four people, all of them old patrons, had been in the café that day. And not one of them had been near the slot-machine—located at the back of the place as it was, and filled with stale chewing-gum which, at a glance, was worth nobody's penny. Furthermore, the proprietor had examined the thing for a chance coin the night before and had left it empty when he locked up; yet there was the square-marked penny nestling alone in the slot-machine at closing time April fifteenth.

He had stared at the coin a long time before passing it in change to an elderly spinster.

''It ain't worth it,'' he muttered to himself. ''I got a restaurant that's makin' me a thin livin', and I ain't in no hurry to get myself bumped off, on the long chance I might get that hundred thousand or that trip instead. No-sirree!''

The spinster took one look at the marked penny, gave a short mouse-like squeak, and flung it into the gutter as though it were a tarantula.

"My land!" she quavered. "I don't want that thing in my pocketbook!"

But she dreamed that night of foreign ports, of coolies jabbering in a brittle tongue, of barracuda fins cutting the surface of deep blue water, and the ruins of ancient cities.

A Negro workman picked up the penny next morning and clung to it all day, dreaming of Harlem, before he succumbed at last to gnawing fear. And the square-marked penny changed hands once more.

The circle-marked penny was first noted in a stack of coins by a teller of the Farmer's Trust.

"We get marked coins every now and then," he said. "I didn't notice this one especially—it may have been here for days."

He pocketed it gleefully, but discovered with a twinge of dismay next morning that he had passed it out to someone without noticing it.

"I wanted to keep it!" he sighed. "For better or for worse!"

He glowered at the stacks of someone else's money before him, and wondered furtively how many tellers really escaped with stolen goods.

A fruit-seller had received the penny. He eyed it dubiously. "Mebbe you bring-a me those mon, heh?" He showed it to his fat, greasy wife, who made the sign of horns against the "evil eye."

"T'row away!" she commanded shrilly. "She iss bad lock!"

Her spouse shrugged and sailed the circle-marked coin across the street. A ragged child pounced on it and scuttered away to buy a twist of licorice. And the circle-marked penny changed hands once more—clutched at by avaricious fingers, stared at by eyes grown sick of familiar scenes, relinquished again by the power of fear.

Those who came into brief possession of the three coins were fretted by the drag and shove of conflicting advice.

"Keep it!" some urged. "Think! It may mean a trip around the world! Paris! China! London! Oh, why couldn't I have got the thing?"

"Give it away!" others admonished. "Maybe it's the third penny—you can't tell. Maybe the symbols don't mean what they seem to, and the square one is the death-penny! I'd throw it away, if I were you."

"No! No!" still others cried. "Hang on to it! It may bring you $100,000. *A hundred thousand dollars!* In these times! Why, fellow, you'd be the same as a millionaire!"

The meaning of the three symbols was on everyone's tongue, and no one agreed with his neighbor's solution to the riddle.

"It's as plain as the nose on my face," one man would declare. "The circle represents the globe—the travel-penny, see?"

"No, no. The cross means that. 'Cross' the seas, don't you get it? Sort of a pun effect. The circle means money—shape of a coin, understand?"

"And the square one—?"

"A grave. A square hole for a coffin, see? Death. It's quite simple. I wish I could get hold of that circle one!"

"You're crazy! The cross one is for death—everybody says so. And believe me, everybody's getting rid of it as soon as they get it! It may be a joke of some kind . . . no danger at all . . . but I wouldn't like to be the holder of that cross-marked penny when April twenty-first rolls around!"

"I'd keep it and wait till the other two had got what was due them. Then, if mine turned out to be the wrong one, I'd throw it away!" one man said importantly.

"But he won't pay up till all three pennies are accounted for, I shouldn't think," another answered him. "And maybe the offer doesn't hold good after April twenty-first—and you'd be losing the hundred thousand dollars or a world tour just because you're scared to find out!"

"That's a big stake, man," another murmured. "But frankly, I wouldn't like to take the chance. He might give me his third gift!"

"He" was how everyone designated the unknown originator of the contest; though, of course, there was no more clue to his sex than to his identity.

"He must be rich," some said, "to offer such expensive prizes."

"And crazy!" others exploded, "threatening to kill the third one. He'll never get away with it!"

"But clever," still others admitted, "to think up the whole business. He knows human nature, whoever he is. I'm inclined to agree with Haverty—it's all a sort of psychological experiment. He's trying to see whether desire for travel or greed for money is stronger than fear of death."

"Does he mean to pay up, do you think?"

"That remains to be seen!"

On the sixth day, Branton had reached a pitch of excitement amounting almost to hysteria. No one could work for wondering about the outcome of the bizarre test on the morrow.

It was known that a grocer's delivery boy held the square-marked coin, for he had been boasting of his indifference as to whether or not the square did represent a yawning grave. He exhibited the penny freely, making jokes about what he intended to do with his hundred thousand dollars—but on the morning of the last day he lost his nerve. Seeing a blind beggar woman huddled in her favorite corner between two shops, he passed close to her and surreptitiously dropped the cent piece into her box of pencils.

"I had it!" he wailed to a friend after he had reached his grocery. "I had it right here in my pocket last night, and now it's gone! See, I've got a hole in the darn' thing—the penny must have dropped out!"

It was also known who held the circle-marked penny. A young soda-clerk, with the sort of ready smile that customers like to see across a marble counter, had discovered the coin and fished it from the cash drawer, exulting over his good fortune.

"Bud Skinner's got the circle penny," people told one another, wavering between anxiety and gladness. "I hope the kid *does* get that world tour—it'd tickle him so! He seems to get such a kick out of life; it's a sin he has to be stuck in this slow burg!"

Finally it was found who held the cross-marked cent piece. "Carlton . . . poor devil!" people murmured in subdued tones. "Death would be a godsend to him. Wonder he hasn't shot himself before this. Guess he just hasn't the nerve."

The man with the cross-marked penny smiled bitterly. "I hope this

blasted little symbol means what they all think it means!'' he confided to a friend.

At last the eagerly awaited day came. A crowd formed in the street outside the newspaper office to see the three possessors of the three marked coins show Haverty their pennies and give him their names to publish. For their benefit the editor met the trio on the sidewalk outside the building, so that all might see them.

The evening edition ran the three people's photographs, with the name, address, and the mark on each one's penny under each picture. Branton read . . . and held its breath.

On the morning of April twenty-second, the old blind beggar woman sat in her accustomed place, musing on the excitement of the previous day, when several people had led her—she knew by the odor of fish from the market across the street—to the newspaper office. There someone had asked her name and many other puzzling things which had bewildered her until she had almost burst into tears.

''Let me alone!'' she had whimpered. ''I ask only enough food to keep from starving, and a place to sleep. Why are you pushing me around like this and yelling at me? Let me go back to my corner! I don't like all this confusion and strangeness that I can't see—it frightens me!''

Then they had told her something about a marked penny they had found in her alms-box, and other things about a large sum of money and some impending danger that threatened her. She was glad when they led her back to her cranny between the shops.

Now as she sat in her accustomed spot, nodding comfortably and humming a little under her breath, a paper fluttered down into her lap. She felt the stiff oblong, knew it was an envelope, and called a bystander to her side.

''Open this for me, will you?'' she requested. ''Is it a letter? Read it to me.''

The bystander tore open the envelope and frowned. ''It's a note,'' he told her. ''Typewritten, and it's not signed. It just says—what the devil?—just says: *'The four corners of the earth are exactly the same.'*

And . . . hey! look at this! . . . oh, I'm sorry; I forgot you're . . . it's a steamship ticket for a world tour! Look, didn't you have one of the marked pennies?"

The blind woman nodded drowsily. "Yes, the one with the square, they said." She sighed faintly. "I had hoped I would get the money, or . . . the other, so I would never have to beg again."

"Well, here's your ticket." The bystander held it out to her uncertainly. "Don't you want it?" as the beggar made no move to take it.

"No," snapped the blind woman. "What good would it be to me?" She seized the ticket in sudden rage, and tore it into bits.

At nearly the same hour, Kenneth Carlton was receiving a fat manila envelope from the postman. He frowned as he squinted at the local postmark over the stamp. His friend Evans stood beside him, paler than Carlton.

"Open it, open it!" he urged. "Read it—no, don't open it, Ken. I'm scared! After all . . . it's a terrible way to go. Not knowing where the blow's coming from, and—"

Carlton emitted a macabre chuckle, ripping open the heavy envelope. "It's the best break I've had in years, Jim. I'm glad! Glad, Jim, do you hear? It will be quick, I hope . . . and painless. What's this, I wonder. A treatise on how to blow off the top of your head?" He shook the contents of the letter onto a table, and then, after a moment, he began to laugh . . . mirthlessly . . . hideously.

His friend stared at the little heap of crisp bills, all of a larger denomination than he had ever seen before. "The money! You get the hundred thousand, Ken! I can't believe. . . ." He broke off to snatch up a slip of yellow paper among the bills. "*Wealth is the greatest cross a man can bear,*" he read aloud the typewritten words. "It doesn't make sense . . . wealth? Then . . . the cross-mark stood for wealth? I don't understand."

Carlton's laughter cracked. "He has depth, that bird—whoever he is! Nice irony there, Jim—wealth being a burden instead of the blessing most people consider it. I suppose he's right, at that. But I wonder if he knows the really ironic part of this act of his little play? A hundred

thousand dollars to a man with—cancer. Well, Jim, I have a month or less to spend it in . . . one more damnable month to suffer through before it's all over!''

His terrible laughter rose again, until his friend had to clap hands to ears, shutting out the sound.

But the strangest part of the whole affair was Bud Skinner's death. Just after the rush hour at noon, he had found a small package, addressed to him, on a back counter in the drug store. Eagerly he tore off the brown paper wrappings, a dozen or so friends crowding around him.

A curiously wrought silver box was what he found. He pressed the catch with trembling fingers and snapped back the lid. An instant later his face took on a queer expression—and he slid noiselessly to the tile floor of the drug store.

The ensuing police investigation unearthed nothing at all, except that young Skinner had been poisoned with *crotalin*—snake venom—administered through a pin-prick on his thumb when he pressed the trick catch on the little silver box. This, and the typewritten note in the otherwise empty box: *''Life ends where it began—nowhere,''* were all they found as an explanation of the clerk's death. Nor was anything else ever brought to light about the mysterious contest of the three marked pennies—which are probably still in circulation somewhere in the United States.

THE UNWANTED

Trudging up the stony mountain road, with the relentless Alabama sun beating down on my head, I began to wish two things, in order of their intensity: I wished I had a big, cold, frosted-over glass of something—iced tea, lemonade, water, anything *wet.* And I wished I had never applied to my prolific Uncle Sam for this job as census-taker!

I sat down under a gnarled old tree, glaring up at the steep incline ahead of me, and decided that there are entirely too many citizens of the United States, and that they live too far apart. The district I was supposed to cover was a section of the Blue Ridge foothills, in which all the inhabitants were said to have one leg shorter than the other—from living on that sheer cliff of a mountain! Already I had covered the few scattered farms along this winding road that seemed determined to end at the gates of Heaven. Suspicious mountain-eyes had peeked at me from every cranny of wind-worn little shacks, built of slab pine. Lean old hound dogs had run out at me, roaring annihilation, then leaping up to lick me all over the face. Small tow-headed children in flour-sack dresses scattered before me like chickens before a hawk.

But they had to be counted, every blessed one of them. Uncle Sam loved them all, and most of them were on his personal relief-list, up

here on Bent Mountain where nothing but honeysuckle and dogwood could be made to grow without a maximum of effort.

I sat for a minute, panting and mopping the perspiration—no, sweat! This was nothing so Emily Post! Then I shifted my big leather folder to the other aching arm and started up the mountain once more. Just ahead, over the tops of scrub pine and oak, I could see a thin curl of smoke—indicating that I either had come to another cabin, or had unfortunately stumbled on somebody's still. Pausing only to examine a blister on my heel, I climbed the hill toward that beckoning smoke-puff. If it was a farm, they would have water of sorts; if it was a still, I would take a drink of "white lightning," and nothing else would matter after that!

Rounding a turn in the snake-like road, I came upon a typical mountain cabin, like any of a score of others I had stopped at this morning. Bright red peppers were hanging in strings from the rafters of a low front stoop, built onto the front of a slab-pine shack. There was the usual gourd-pole standing, gaunt and skeletal, in the yard. Martins darted in and out of the hanging gourd bird-houses, those professional hawk-spotters for the chickens that clucked and scratched about the yard. Then, bubbling up clear and sweet as the one Moses struck from a rock, I saw a mountain spring just beyond the house. A gourd-dipper hung beside it, and a large watermelon lay chilling in its depths beside two brown crocks of milk or butter. With a faint moan I headed for this oasis—

And stopped short.

A tall, spare mountaineer with a bushy red beard and a missing right arm had appeared, as though the rocky ground had sprouted him. His narrow blue eyes held an expression almost identical to the look of the rifle bore he held cradled in his left arm. It was pointed directly at my heart, which was pounding against my ribs like a trapped rabbit.

But I managed to smile. "Good morning, sir. I'm here to take the census. . . . Are you the head of the house?"

The blue eyes narrowed a fraction. Their owner spat. I heard the click of a cocked rifle as he frowned, as though puzzled at the word "census"; then, in a deep rusty drawl:

"You ain't takin' nothin' around here, ma'm. *Git!* Besides," he added with simple dignity, "we ain't got nary'ne. We're pore folks. . . ."

I stifled a giggle, managing to keep my face straight with an effort—in spite of that deadly looking weapon leveled at my chest.

"No, no. I mean. . . . The Government sent me to. . . ."

At the word, my unwilling host stiffened a bit more. His cold eyes flicked a look at my official folder, and he snorted.

"We don't want no re-lief!" he snapped. "Them as can't do for theirselves—like them shif'less Hambys down the road!—you give *them* your re-lief! Me and Marthy can keep keer of one 'nother!"

A grin of admiration crept over my face at sight of this one-armed, undernourished old hellion, standing here on his little piece of unfertile land and defying the whole world to help or hinder him. This, I thought, is our American heritage. Pioneers like these hill people had made our nation what it is today. But some of them, like this old farmer, were still pioneering, still fighting to carve a living out of wilderness and weather. He didn't think of himself as a "citizen," didn't trade on it, and had probably never voted or paid taxes in his life. But he was an American, all right!

"Look," I said gently. "All I'm supposed to do is take your name, and the names of all your family. For the files in Washington. They have to know how many people there are in the country. Every ten years, we. . . ."

The old codger—I couldn't decide how old he was; perhaps fifty, perhaps sixty—just looked at me.

"How-come?" he asked simply. "How-come they want to know about *us?* Me and Marthy don't bother nobody. Don't ask favors. Don't aim fer nobody to push us around. We jest want to be let alone. Was anybody down in the bed, I reckon we'd holp 'em. Rest o' the time—*leave us be!*"

I gulped, telling myself that here, again, was a typical American. It was obvious that my "basic questions" would be roundly resented by this two-fisted individualist, and certainly not answered unless I resorted to a sneak-approach.

I shrugged, and laid my folder down on a sawed-off stump.

"All right, Mr. . . . er? I didn't catch the name?"

"I don't aim to drop it," the old hellion answered dryly, but a twinkle of humor came into those rifle-eyes of his. The muzzle of his weapon lowered only a fraction. He jerked his thumb toward the spring. "You dry? Git ye a drink, if you're a mind to. Then," he added politely but firmly, "I reckon you'll be on your way? Got a tin lizzie someplace?"

"Parked down at Stoots General Store. I had to walk the rest of the way," I let my voice fall an octave, forlornly, hoping to play on his sympathy. After all, he was a citizen, and I was being paid, not to hike up and down these mountains, but to list the people living on them. "Think your . . . er, wife? . . . would mind if I sat down on that cool-looking porch for a minute and caught my breath? Folks who live in town," I added, grinning at him and trying flattery, "live from side to side. Not up and down, like you-all around these parts! I wouldn't last a week!"

That drew a chuckle from him. But the rifle was still pointed in my general direction. Then I saw him stiffen, looking past my shoulder at someone. He frowned; shook his head slightly. But I turned too quickly—in time to see a frail, quiet-looking little woman with graying hair and soft luminous dark eyes peeking out at me from the cabin doorway. She started to duck back out of sight, in obedience to the man's headshake. Then she seemed to think better of it, and stepped out into full view. There was a kind of glow about her face, a warm happy look, that drew me at once.

"Why, Jared!" she scolded in a mild, sweet drawl. "Didn' you ast the lady to come in and set? *Shame* on you!" She winked at me cheerfully, a woman's wink, sharing the eccentricities of menfolk as our mutual cross. "I reckon you're jest plumb tuckered out, ain't you, ma'm? Why, come in! I'll send one o' the childurn to the sprang to fetch ye a cold drink o' buttermilk. Don't nothin' cool me off like buttermilk, of a hot day!" she chattered on hospitably, then raised her voice. *"Tommee! Cleavydel! . . .* Now, where'd them young'uns git off to? Berry-pickin', I'll be bound! . . . *Raynell! Woodrow!"* she

shouted again, then gave up, shaking her head and smiling.

I hesitated, glancing back at the man with the rifle . . . and caught a peculiar look of alarm on his bearded face. He opened his mouth once as though about to protest, then sighed, and turned away to the spring.

"I'll fetch the buttermilk," he offered gruffly. "I . . . I reckon Marthy would like a-mite o' company now and then, at that. Man-person don't take no stock in visitin'!"

"Well," I hesitated, as he strode out of earshot. "I'm not exactly here for a visit—" I eyed the little woman, whose bright eyes instantly took on a look of sensitive withdrawal.

"Oh—! You . . . you ain't from County Welfare?" she faltered. "Jared, he's sot agin any kind of charity. Even the soldier kind. He lost that-there arm of his'n in the German war. Come back here to his pa's place and found it growed up in weeds, all his folks died off. Typhoid. I . . . I . . ." She flushed, and lowered her eyes. "I was only a girl-baby when I first seen him, a-huntin' rabbits with that one arm. Took a shine to one another first sight, and I run off from my daddy to marry him. . . ."

She stopped, as if shocked at the flood of pent-up conversation that burst from her at sight of another woman. From what the old man had said, I sensed that she did not have the pleasure of much company, up here off the beaten trail. Church-going was about the only recreation most of these mountain women had, anyway; and there was something withdrawn about this household. I had sensed it before, though there was nothing I could put my finger on and call it "unusual." This middle-aged couple seemed a cross-section of the mountaineer families I had encountered today and yesterday, on my census-taking trek over the district assigned me. All were poor. All were suspicious, more or less, of the personal questions I had to ask. All had large families of children.

I sat down on the porch and opened my folder, smiling. "No, no," I answered her question. "The Government makes a . . . a list of all the folks living in this country, and I'm here to ask you a few questions. About your family and your farm. . . . Your name is—?" I waited, pencil poised.

The little gray woman's face cleared. "Oh!" She beamed. "I . . . I catch on now to what you . . . ! Our oldest boy told me about it, just yesterday. Said a lady was over to Baldy Gap, askin' questions for the Gover'mint. Likely 't'was you, yourself?" I nodded, beaming back at her. "Well, then!" she said eagerly. "I'll be happy and glad to answer ye. Jared," she lowered her voice apologetically, "he's a mite ill at strangers. Don't you take hurt by nothin' he says!"

I sat back in the split-bottom rocker, thankful to get the business over with so smoothly. Their name, I learned, was Forney. Jared C. The "C." was just an initial; it didn't stand for anything. Jared's mother had simply thought it sounded well. Martha Ann was her name, aged forty-eight to her husband's sixty-seven. They had, she said brightly, eleven children. Woodrow was the oldest. The youngest, a baby in arms, was not yet named. He was simply called "the least one."

Smiling, I jotted down the names in my book, then asked Martha Forney to supply their birth dates. Rocking gently, she ticked them off with the fond memory of any mother. I stopped, frowning slightly at one apparent error in my figures. . . .

"Oh—I'm *sorry!* I must have got the names mixed." I laughed gaily. "I have the birthday of your youngest child listed as *second!* 1934. . . ."

Martha Forney turned toward me, her great luminous eyes glowing with matter-of-fact pride at having mothered this large brood.

"May tenth . . . 1934?" she corroborated the figures I had set down, then nodded happily. "Yes, that's right. That's when the least'ne come to us. Woodrow, he was the first. I reckon on account of Jared's arm and us needin' a half-growed boy to help us around the place. But then," she burst out shyly, "I . . . I got to honin' for a *little* 'ne. One I could hold in my arms. . . . And the next mornin', why, there he was! Nestled down in the bed on my side, a-kickin' the covers and cooin' like a turtle-dove . . . !"

My jaws dropped. I blinked, peering at my cheery-voiced hostess with a look of shock. Then, I jumped. Jared Forney was looming over

me, with a crock of buttermilk held in the crook of his one arm. His bearded face was like a thundercloud of anger, with flashes of lethal lightning darting from those cold blue eyes.

With an ominous thump he set down the crock and towered above me, single fist clenched as though he seriously debated smashing it into my startled face.

"Marthy!" he snapped. "Git on into the house! . . . And you," he glared at me. "You jest *git!* You got no call to come sneakin' around our place, a-progin' into things that don't consarn you . . . and a-pokin' fun at them that's afflicted!"

Afflicted? I glanced at that stump of an arm, wondering if that was what he meant. But the gentle, protective look he threw after his wife's meekly retreating figure made me wonder. Then suddenly I remembered those weirdly garbled figures on my census sheet, and thought I understood.

"Oh, I . . . I'm terribly sorry," I murmured. "I . . . just didn't understand. She . . . she was telling me about the children, their names, and when they were born. . . ."

"We got no young'nes," the old man cut me off, very quietly. "You mustn't mind Marthy. She's . . . not right in her head. And you oughtn't to been pesterin' her, upsettin' her with all them questions . . . ! he fired at me fiercely. "Ma'm, if there's anything important you want to ask, ask me! And then, I'll thank ye to git off'n my property and back where you belong!"

"Yes. Yes, of course," I nodded humbly, and managed to stammer out the last few questions about crops, acreage, and the rest, which the old fellow answered in a flat gruff voice. I scribbled down the information hurriedly, and was about to get to hell out of there, when I happened to glance back at the cabin door.

The little gray-haired woman was standing just inside, half in shadow, half in clear mountain sunlight that slanted through the pines overhead. Her arms cuddled a wad of clothing close to her breast, and as she bent over it, crooning, I thought I saw a baby's small chubby hand wave from the folds of the cloth, playfully patting at her cheek.

I whirled to face the old man, frowning. "I thought you had no children?" I called his hand rather coolly; then decided that their offspring must be illegitimate, to account for his queer attitude. My face softened. "Everybody," I said kindly, "is entitled to his status as a citizen of this country, Mr. Forney. Your baby is, too. He's entitled to free education, the right to vote when he's twenty-one, the right to apply for certain benefits. . . ."

My words broke off, like glass. Jared Forney was staring at me as if I had taken leave of my senses. His blue eyes darted toward his wife, then back to me with a shocked, amazed expression I shall never forget.

"You . . . you *see* it?" he whispered sharply. "You see ary *baby* . . . ?"

I gaped at him, then glanced back at the woman, at the cooing child in her arms. A soft rounded little cheek peeped out from the folds of the old dress, which she held lightly in her embrace, rocking it. I saw a tendril of curly blond hair, a flash of big innocent baby-eyes. I turned back to Jared Forney, deciding that he, and not his quiet, gentle little wife, was the mental case. Anyone could mix the birth dates of eleven children, especially a vague, unlettered mountain woman like Mrs. Forney.

"*See it?*" I echoed, puzzled. "See what, the baby? Of course I do! You weren't trying to hide it? Surely," I said softly, "you are not ashamed of a sweet little cherub like that? . . . And I've got to take his name and birth date," I added firmly. "That's the law, Mr. Forney. You could be fined and put in jail for withholding information from a census-taker."

The mild threat went right over his head. Jared Forney continued to stare at me, then back at his wife. He shook his head, muttering, then sat down weakly in a chair, mopping his forehead with a great red bandana, pulled from his overall pocket.

"Well, I swannee!" he whispered in a shaken voice. "Well, the Lord holp my time! Well . . . I . . . *swannee!*"

I frowned at him impatiently, pencil raised. "Please, Mr. Forney," I pursued the advantage I seemed to have gained, for some reason I could

not fathom. "If you have other children, you must tell me their names—or let your wife tell me. It doesn't matter . . . er . . . whether they are legally yours. . . ." I began.

He jerked up his head, glaring at me. "Don't you say nothin' like that about Marthy!" he cut me short. "There ain't a finer, better woman in these hills than my old 'oman! Even if . . . even if she is a mite. . . ." He gulped, casting another wary glance at the quiet figure with that baby in her arms. Then, swallowing twice, he called uncertainly: "W-woodrow? where are ye at, son? Cleavydel? Tom? Raynell . . .?"

Instantly, at his call, a group of children appeared from the shadowy pine coppice at our left. Sunlight, slanting golden through the quill-like leaves, made my eyes burn and smart, so that I could not see their faces clearly. But as they moved forward, in a smiling group, I made out the features of two young girls in their teens, a small boy of perhaps eleven, and a tall youth in his early twenties. They were all strong, healthy-looking children, in spite of a pronounced pallor that was unusual among these sun-tanned mountaineers. They were dressed in neat flour-sack shifts, or cut-down overalls, obviously having belonged to their father. All four were barefooted, and swinging lard-cans brimful of blackberries. I remember thinking it odd at the time that none of their faces and hands were stained with the dark purple juice . . . but perhaps they had removed these berry stains at the spring on their way to the cabin. What struck me as especially odd was their coloring.

The two girls were completely different, and would never have been taken for sisters. One was sturdy and dark, the other slim and blonde. The boys were as unlike each other as they were unlike the girls. One, the younger, had a pronounced Eurasian cast to his features, with small black slanted eyes in a Mongoloid face. The older was a redhead, lanky, freckled, and grinning. All of them seemed in high spirits, with a glow of such pure happiness in each face that I could not help glowing back at them.

"What a fine bunch of kids!" I commented to Mrs. Forney, with a faint look of reproach for her dour spouse.

Jared Forney gaped at me again, his face paling. He followed my gaze, squinting and shading his eyes against the sun, then shook his head.

"I *swannee!*" he gulped. "I . . . I . . . Ain't nobody but her ever really seen. . . ."

He broke off again, mopping his forehead once more and glancing sheepishly back at his wife.

"Well," I said briskly, "I'm sorry, but I've got to be getting along." I turned back to Mrs. Forney again, to ask pleasantly, "Do you have the children's birthdays listed in your family Bible? If you could get it for me, let me copy them. . . ."

Martha Forney glanced past me at her husband, a mild look of accusation.

"I . . . did have 'em wrote down," she said gently. "Hit was a peddler come by here, and I ast him if he'd write 'em for me. I never learned to read or write. . . ." She confessed timidly. "But I had all the dates in my head, and he wrote down what I told him. Then Jared," again she glanced at the hunched, muttering figure, "he seen 'em and tore out the page. Said hit was a sin and a 'bomination to the Lord to write a lie in His Book. . . . But it was Him sent 'em! Every one! I . . . I know I never *birthed* ary one of 'em my own self, not like other women have kids. But . . . I . . ." She floundered, a vague, bewildered look coming into her face as though she puzzled over an old familiar problem, still unsolved to her satisfaction. "I'm their maw. . . ."

Then, suddenly, she turned to me. Those luminous dark eyes, alight with an innocent happiness and devotion, seemed to blot out the poverty and squalor of that small mountain farm, bathing it in a soft golden glow like the sunlight sifting through the trees overhead.

"Ma'm," she said abruptly, in a quiet voice like the murmur of a mountain brook, "Ma'm . . . *You* love kids, too, don't ye? You got ary young'nes of your own?"

I said I had a little boy, aged six, whom I loved dearly . . . and added, politely, that I should be getting back to him before suppertime. Martha Forney nodded, beaming. She shot a look of triumph at the old man, who was still muttering under his breath.

"There, Jared!" she said happily. "You see? That's all there is to it. There's some as don't want young'nes," she added sadly. "For one reason or another, they don't *want* to bring a baby into the world. There's some as destroy. . . . But once they've started, once they've come just so far towards bein' borned, they *can't* go back—poor mites! All they ever want is . . . just to be wanted and loved, and mebbe needed, like Woodrow. Why, there must be thousands," she said softly, "a-pushin' and crowdin' *outside* some place, in hopes somebody'll let 'em come on ahead and be somebody's young'ne. Now Woodrow, I reckon he waited for years out there, wherever it is they have to wait. He was a real big boy when I . . . I wanted a son. And," she sighed, happily, "that very evening, I heard somebody choppin' firewood out back o' the cabin. Thought it was Jared . . . but he was off a-huntin' possum! When he come back and found all that stovewood, he thought *I* done it—or some neighbor who was wantin' to shame him for leavin' me alone, without ary man-person to do for me. But . . . it was Woodrow! Jared, he ain't never been able to *see* his boy a-holpin' him around the place—just sees what he *does.* He's learned," the little old woman chuckled, "to tell him and then go off some place. When he gits back, the chores is done. Woodrow," she spoke proudly with a note of deep fondness, "he's a right handy boy around a farm. Ain't hardly nothin' he can't turn his hand to! . . . and," her eyes saddened, "why there was somebody onct that didn't want a son like *him,* I jest can't understand!"

I had sat in wordless amazement, listening to all this. Now it was my turn to gape at Jared Forney, wracking my brain to figure out which of these two old mountain people was the insane one . . . or whether *I* was! Out of sheer desire to get my feet on solid earth again, I scribbled some figures on my census sheet, cleared my throat, and asked little Mrs. Forney point-blank:

"And . . . the baby's birthday? He's about . . . eight months old, isn't he? Some . . . er . . . some neighbor left them on your doorstep? They're foster-children, is that it?"

"No ma'm," Martha Forney said clearly. "They're *mine!* I . . . I caused 'em to git borned, jest by wishin' . . . and lovin'. Like an old

hen settin' on another hen's eggs!'' She chuckled with a matter-of-fact humor that made my scalp stir. ''Of course they ain't . . . ain't *regular* young'nes. Jared, now, he ain't never seen 'em . . . exceptin' once when he was likkered up,'' she said in a tone of mild reproof for past sins. ''Fell in a ditch full o' rain water, and liked to drownded! Hit was Cleavydel holped him out . . . and he was that ashamed before his own daughter, he never has drank another jugful! Oh! mebbe a nip now and then,'' she added with a tender, tolerant grimace at her errant spouse. ''But not, you know, *drinkin'*. Them kids has been the makin' of Jared,'' she said complacently. ''Time was he'd beat me and go off to town for a week or more,'' she confided. ''But now he knows the young'nes is lookin' up to him . . . even if *he* can't see *them!* . . . and he's as good a man as you'll find in these hills!''

I almost snickered, noting the sheepish, subdued, and even proud look on the old man's face. Here, indeed, was a fine and loving father. . . . But I still could not understand the origin of that smiling group of children before me, and of the baby in the woman's arms—the baby she said was born before those other three half-grown children!

''Er. . . .'' I tried again, helplessly. ''Mrs. Forney. . . . You mean they're adopted? I mean, not legally adopted, but. . . . You say they were given to you by somebody who 'didn't want them,' as you call it? I . . . I'm afraid I don't quite. . . .''

''They wasn't give to me,'' Martha Forney interrupted stoutly, with a fond smile from the baby to the group near the pine coppice. ''I *taken* 'em! They was supposed to be born to some other woman, every last one of 'em! Some woman who didn't want 'em to be born. . . . But *I* did! You can do anything, if you're a mind to . . . and the Lord thinks it's right! So,'' she finished matter-of-factly, ''Jared and me have got eleven young'nes. Nary one of 'em looks like us, except Woodrow's a redhead like Jared. But that's accidental, o'course. They look like their *real* ma and pa . . . *John Henry!*'' She raised her voice abruptly. ''Where are you, son? . . . John Henry,'' she explained to me in a half-whisper, ''he's kind of timid. *Ressie May!*'' she called again, then sighed: ''Folks can think up more reasons for not wantin' young'nes, seems like!''

I rubbed my eyes, staring at the circle of children beside the cabin, waiting in a silent, good-humored group for whatever fond command their parents might issue next. As I looked, two more dim figures—for they all seemed dim, ethereal, like figures in an old snapshot, faded by time—joined the others. One, a thin sad-eyed boy of seven, with a markedly Jewish cast to his features, smiled at me and ducked his head shyly, playing with a flower in his hand—a black-eyed Susan that, oddly enough, looked clumsy and solid in the misty fingers that held it. The second new figure—I started—was a little Negro girl. She giggled silently as my gaze fell on her, digging one bare black toe into the dust. On her face, too, was that blissful glow of complete happiness and security.

"Ressie May's colored," Mrs. Forney whispered. "But she don't know it! To me, she's jest like all the rest o' my young'nes. . . ."

Suddenly Jared Forney leaped to his feet, glowering down at me.

"I ain't gonna have no more of this!" he thundered nervously. "They . . . they ain't there, and you both know it! You don't see nary young'ne, and neither does Marthy! I tell her over and over, it's all in her mind—from wantin' a passel o' kids we never could have! She's . . . sickly, Marthy is. She . . . Her paw alluz allowed she was a woods-colt, her ownself, and he tuck it out in beatin' her till she run off from him! All that's mixed up in her head, and now . . . well, she's a mite teched, as folks around here know. Her with her make-like young'nes named Woodrow, and Cleavydel, and . . . and some of 'em ain't even of our faith or color! I . . . I don't know where she gits all them berries she says the children pick, or how she does all them chores behindst my back—that she makes out like Woodrow done! But . . . if it made her any happier," he lowered his voice, speaking fiercely for my ears only, "I'd pretend the Devil was takin' the night with us!"

My eyes misted, and I was about to nod in complete sympathy. But he wasn't having any. To this hard-bitten old rascal, I was against him, like the rest of the world, just another menace to his wife's peace of mind.

"And now," he snarled, "you *git!* You got no call to set there, makin' a mock of them as cain't holp theirselves. And laughin',

makin' out like you see them young'nes same as she . . . !''

''But . . . but I *do* see . . . !''

I broke off hastily. Jared Forney's rifle had appeared again as if by magic, cradled in that good arm of his . . . and pointed unwaveringly at my forehead. His left eye sighted along the barrel, drawing a bead on a spot just between my startled eyes . . . and I didn't stop to protest any longer. There was cold-blooded murder in that squinting blue eye, and a fierce proud protectiveness for that vague little wife of his that brooked no argument.

I turned and ran, hugging my census-folder under my arm and not stopping to pick up a pencil that bounced from behind my ear. I ran, praying. Then I heard the click of a cocked rifle and just ran. . . .

Only once did I so much as glance back over my shoulder at the humble little mountain cabin. When I did . . . well, it was only a bundle of old clothes that crooning woman was cuddling in her empty arms. There were four lard-buckets brimful of blackberries *someone* had picked and set down just beyond the pine coppice. But the group of smiling, ill-assorted children had disappeared.

For me, that is, they had disappeared—perhaps because . . . I don't know. Because I didn't care enough, and it took that to make them live and to keep them alive. Perhaps it was only my devotion to my own little boy that made me see them at all, as Jared Forney's childless wife saw them. Rather sadly, I took out my census sheet, a few yards down the road, and scratched out the names of eleven children that no one—no one but Martha Forney—had wanted to live. Uncle Sam, I realized with a wry smile, might take a dim view of statistics such as those. Dream-children. Wish-children, born only of will and need . . . and love. The unwanted. The unborn. . . .

But for little old Mrs. Forney, their ''mother'' with the heart as big as all outdoors, I am quite certain that they are very much alive. And the Bureau of Vital Statistics could be wrong!

THE SHOT-TOWER GHOST

Most of us have nostalgic, so-dear-to-my-heart memories tucked into the back of our minds, our subconscious minds, to be coaxed out briefly now and then by some particular sound, some odor, some half-familiar sight. . . .

As for me, I cannot hear a whippoorwill crying at night but I go flying back through time and space to our old family "Homeplace" in Wythe County, Virginia. The ferry is no longer there—replaced by a coldly efficient steel bridge that the state built. Cars and wagons, herds of sheep, and leisurely riders on horseback no longer pause at the brink of New River to call across: *"Hello-o-o!"* for the stocky, smiling ferryman to raft them over to where the road to Wytheville begins again. But on the east bank, the tall square fieldstone shot-tower still broods over the green-velvet countryside—a grim reminder of a day when Virginia was wracked with civil war, and brother turned against brother.

Yes; the shot-tower is still there, a historical landmark which my family at last turned over to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, for the edification of the passing tourist. The spiral staircase that winds up and up inside the tower is new—not rotten and precarious as it was

when I was there, one of the scattered cousins who came "Back Home" every summer for a visit. The sturdy beamed floor of the single room, high up against the ceiling, used to be spattered with little hardened splashes of lead, spilled eighty-five years ago by determined Rebels and loyal sweating Negroes frantically making ammunition for Lee's troops. The leaden souvenirs are probably gone by now; and the square hole in the floor is fenced in by chicken wire, lest the unwary tourist fall through it into that dark matching hole in the tower's dirt floor below. This leads, well-like, into the river. I am not sure about the huge iron cauldron which caught the shot. (Molten lead formed round rifle balls when it fell, hissing, into cold water.) The pot may yet be hanging down there into the river. Once, on a dare from another visiting cousin, I climbed halfway down the slimy ladder into that chill, murmuring darkness. But something slithered against my arm, and I never finished the adventure . . . especially as it was almost nightfall, and time for the Shot-Tower Ghost to appear.

Let me say here, to your probable disappointment, that there never was a "shot-tower ghost." This gruesome family-specter was nothing more than a product of my Great-uncle Robert's imagination. He is dead now, a white-bearded irascible old bachelor of the "hoss-racin' and cyard game" school. Dead, too, is Shadrach, his stooped and gray-haired "body-servant," last of the family slaves who accepted their "freedom" with a bored sniff as the impractical notion of "a passel o' po-white Yankees." To the last day of their lives—about two weeks apart—Uncle Robert and Shadrach, respectively, remained unreconstructed and unfreed. And the fact that one of my aunts married a Northerner, bore him a fine son, got rich, and came back to buy and remodel another old country place adjoining the Homeplace, was a great shock to both of them. I think they were convinced that "Yankees" are a roving tribe of gypsy marauders, and incapable of fathering offspring.

That son was my Cousin Mark, who had none of the gracious charm of his mother's side of the family and all of the butt-headed stubbornness of his Connecticut father. But in those days just after World War I—"the war in Europe" as Uncle Robert verbally shrugged off

any of our conflicts but the one between the States—I was a very young fluttery miss with a terrible crush on Francis X. Bushman, thence my Cousin Mark because he slightly resembled him.

This particular summer, however, another cousin of mine from the Georgia branch was also visiting the Homeplace, a redheaded minx named Adelia—she is fat and has five children now, may I add with vicious satisfaction. But she was two years older than I, and just entering the Seminary, so Cousin Mark's eyes were all for her, not for a gawky high school sophomore from Birmingham, Alabama.

Adelia was also popular with the younger set of Wytheville. Almost every night a squealing, laughing carful of young people would bear down on the ferryman, who had orders to ferry Miss Adelia's friends across free of charge. Uncle Robert and Shadrach would roll their eyes at each other and moan faintly, but a short while later my uncle would be grinning from ear to ear, seated in his favorite chair on the wide columned veranda with a bouquet of pretty girls clustered around him, begging for "ghost stories." Shadrach, his eyeballs and teeth the only white thing about his beaming ebony face, would circulate around, offering syllabub and tiny beaten-biscuits with baked ham between them, or calling "rounds" for an old-fashioned reel in the big living room where the Victrola played incessantly.

Cousin Mark was a member of this coterie more often than anyone else, and Uncle Robert always made him welcome in a formally polite manner that Adelia, giggling beside me later in our big featherbed upstairs, would mock outrageously. Mark and Uncle Robert seemed to clash as naturally as a hound and a fox, for Mark had a rather rude way of finding holes in Uncle Robert's tall tales, mostly about the supernatural.

"Did you ever actually *see* a ghost, sir?" Mark demanded once, sitting at ease on the front steps against a backdrop of gray dusk and twinkling fireflies . . . and the distant plaintive crying of whippoorwills.

"I have, suh!" my uncle lashed back at him stiffly. "With mah own two eyes . . . and if Ah may say so, Ah could pick off a Yankee sniper right now at fifty yards with a good rifle!"

"Unless he picked you off first," my cousin pointed out blandly.

Then, with stubborn insistence that seemed to infuriate my uncle: "*When* did you ever see a ghost, sir, may I ask?" he pursued. "And where? And how do you know it wasn't just an . . . an optical illusion?"

"Suh . . . !" Uncle Robert drew himself up, sputtering slightly like an old firecracker. "Suh, the Shot-Tower Ghost is no optical illusion. He is, and Ah give you mah word on it, a true case of psychic phenomena. You understand," Uncle slipped into his act—a very convincing one, in spite of Adelia's covert giggling, "you understand that, after some very dramatic or tragic incident in which a person dies suddenly, there may be what is called a 'psychic residue.' An emanation, an . . . an ectoplasmic replica of the person involved. This replica is sometimes left behind after death occurs—the death of the body, that is. For, the circumstances under which the person died may have been so . . . so impossible to leave hanging, the ectoplasmic replica of that person lives on, repeating and repeating his last act or trying to finish some task that he strongly wishes to finish. . . ."

"Poppycock!" my cousin interrupted flatly. "I don't believe there's any such thing as an . . . 'ectoplasmic replica'! What a term!" he laughed lightly. "Where'd you dig that one up, sir? At some table-tapping séance—price ten bucks a spook?"

"No, suh, I did not." Uncle Robert was bristling now; Adelia punched me and giggled. We could all see how very much he wanted to take this young Yankee-born whippersnapper down a peg or two. "I find the term used often," Uncle drawled, "in Madame Blavatsky's four-volume work on the metaphysical. She was considered the foremost authority on the supernatural during the last century, the nineteenth century, when such notables as Arthur Conan Doyle were seriously studying the possibility of life after death. . . ."

"Blavatsky . . . Blavatsky," Mark murmured, then grinned and snapped his fingers. "Oh yes. I remember reading about her, something in *The Golden Bough.* Sir James Frazer says she's either the greatest authority . . . *or* the biggest fraud in the history of metaphysical study! I read that once in the library at Tech, just browsing around. . . ."

Uncle Robert choked. Most young people listened in wide-eyed awe to his erudite-sounding explanations of his "tower ghost" and certain other spook-yarns that he cooked up for our naive pleasure. But Mark was tossing his high-sounding phrases right back at him with great relish, and a covert wink at Adelia who was perched on the arm of Uncle's chair. His smug air seemed to annoy her, though, for:

"Oh, the shot-tower ghost isn't any fraud!" Adelia proclaimed tauntingly, with an affectionate pat for Uncle's gnarled old hand—at the moment gripping his cane as if he intended breaking it over Mark's head. "I've seen it, myself," she announced. "Lib has, too—haven't you, Lib?" she demanded, and I nodded solemnly.

"Now *you've* seen it!" Mark jeered, flipping a coin in the air and watching it glint softly in the mellow glow that slanted through the fanlight over the door. "Anybody else? Hmm? I've been hearing about this spook of Uncle Robert's ever since we moved here from Connecticut—but I've yet to catch a glimpse of him myself! A Confederate soldier with his legs cut off—how touching! Making shot for his comrades up to the day of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. And when the sad news comes, he throws himself off the tower into the river . . . Haha!" Mark chuckled suddenly, fastening a cold, matter-of-fact young eye on Uncle Robert's face. "Come on, Unk. Didn't you make that one up out of whole cloth? It sounds like something out of one of those old paperback dime novels I found in the attic. *Capitola, the Madcap;* or, *Love Conquers All. . . .*"

"Young man!" Uncle Robert stood up abruptly, quivering. "Ah must ask you to mend yoah Yankee manners to yo' elders, suh! Are you havin' the . . . the temerity to dispute my word, you young . . . ?"

At that moment Shadrach took over, gently but firmly. Throwing a light shawl around his master's shoulders, he maneuvered around beside him, preparing to help him to his feet.

"Marse Robert, hit's yo' bedtime," the old darkey pronounced. "Come along, now, Marse Robert. Tell de young folks good night, cause Ah'm fixin' to help you up to yo' room."

"Shadrach—damme, Ah'll take a hoss-whip to yo' black hide!" My uncle roared petulantly, shrugging off the shawl and banging on the

porch with his cane. "Quit babyin' me, confound it! Ah'll go to bed when Ah please! Get! Get away from me! Ah'll bend this cane over youah nappy head! Ah'll. . . ."

"Yassuh," said Shadrach imperturbably. "Hit's leb'm-thirty. Time you was asleep. Come on, now, Marse Robert. . . ." He tugged gently at my uncle's arm, finally wielding his heaviest weapon, the mention of my great-grandmother. "Miss Beth wouldn't like you settin' up so late, catchin' yo' death o' dampness. . . ."

"Oh, the devil!" Uncle snapped at him peevishly. "Ah'm comin', Ah'm comin'! Soon as Ah tell these pretty young ladies good night . . . and take a cane to this young smartalec!" He glared at Cousin Mark, who grinned back at him lazily. "It's not a wise thing," Uncle Robert intoned ominously, "to joke about the supernatural or regard it as a . . . parlor-game! And one of these days, young suh, you're going to find that out in a way you'll never forget!"

With that, and followed by a chorus of subdued giggles, he stamped into the house, leaving Adelia and me to bid our guests farewell. At the gate, after the carful of his friends had rolled away toward the ferry, Cousin Mark lingered, trying to persuade Adelia to kiss him good night. I would gladly have obliged, but my redheaded Georgia cousin switched away from him coolly, tossing her long auburn mop of curls.

"No, I won't!" she said shortly. "The idea, poking fun at Uncle Robert right to his face! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mark . . . and besides, you're such a smartalec, like Uncle said! How do *you* know there's no such thing as a ghost, just because you happen never to have seen one?"

Mark laughed softly, derisively. "And neither have you and Lib," he added. "I saw you wink at each other. Did you really think I'd swallow that silly yarn about the Confederate soldier?"

Adelia nudged me all at once, a signal to stand by and back up whatever mischief she had in mind.

"I've just remembered," she said quietly, "what tomorrow is! Lib . . . it was a year ago that . . . that *we* saw the soldier throw himself off that lookout porch at the top of the tower . . . remember? You and I were riding horseback up the hill, just at sundown. And you heard that

awful scream, and we glanced up just in time to . . . to see that shadow falling from the tower into the river! On July ninth, the date of Lee's surrender at Appomattox!''

''It was *April* ninth!'' I hissed in her ear. ''You'll ruin everything . . . !''

''Sh-h!'' Adelia hissed back, giggling. ''A damyankee wouldn't know *what* day it was, hardly the *year!* . . . Oh, I'll never forget that sight,'' she whispered, shuddering. ''Not as long as I live! The look of despair on that man's face, the glimpse I got of it as he fell down, down. . . .''

''Bah!'' Mark cut her off with a snort. ''You're as big a liar as your Uncle Robert! He and his ridiculous . . . ectoplasmic replica!''

''But it's true!'' I chimed in solemnly. ''When we told about it, they dragged the river. But no body was ever found, and none turned up at the Falls downstream. He was wearing a . . . a shabby gray uniform. And . . . and a gray forage cap.'' I elaborated, warming to our little hoax. ''And he wasn't more than four feet tall—his legs, you know; they'd been shot off by cannon-fire. . . .''

Adelia punched me again sharply. ''Don't overdo it!'' she hissed, then, with a grave, frightened look turned on our cousin from Connecticut: ''Oh, Mark, you mustn't scoff at such things! Tomorrow is the date of the surrender. Maybe if . . . if you watch for him on the hill at sundown, you'll . . . you'll see him, too!''

Mark snorted again, and strode toward the tethered horse he had ridden across the fields to Uncle's house earlier. In tan riding pants and sport shirt open at the neck, he was the handsomest thing I had ever seen—barring, of course, Francis X. himself. I sighed faintly as Adelia and I, arms about each other's waist, watched him mount and start to ride away, then wheel his spirited little bay back to face us.

''So tomorrow's the witching hour, huh?'' he laughed. ''Okay, I'll be here—with bells on! But let's make this worthwhile, cuz!'' he drawled tormentingly. ''How about a little bet of . . . say, five bucks? You pay me if our ghost doesn't show up. If I see him, I'll pay you . . . and gladly!'' he jeered.

Adelia stiffened. I saw her pretty chin set and her brown eyes flash,

taking up the challenge Mark's cool blue eyes had thrown her.

"All right, Mr. Smartalec!" she snapped back. "It's a bet! Just be mighty sure you bring that five dollars!"

"Just you have yours in your hand!" Mark taunted, "Want to make a little side bet, huh? A kiss maybe? That kiss you won't give me tonight?"

"That's a bet, too!" Adelia answered briskly. "That's how *sure* I am that there *is* a tower ghost, and that you'll see him tomorrow!"

"Okay, carrot-top!" our cousin laughed. "Remember, you're no Southern gentleman if you don't pay up!"

He galloped away with that, and we strolled back toward the house together, Adelia and I, listening to his lusty voice singing, out of sheer perversity, Sherman's "Marching Through Georgia." Adelia stamped her foot.

"I *hate* that . . . that . . . !" she burst out, unconvincingly. "Lib, we've just got to fix his wagon tomorrow!" Her eyes began to twinkle all at once, and she ran up the curving staircase to burst into Uncle's room, where Shadrach was trying to make him drink his hot milk instead of another whiskey.

Quickly she related the bet to Uncle Robert, whose mild old eyes lighted up also with mischief. He slapped his knee, chuckling.

"We'll fix him!" he promised. "Shadrach, get me young Saunders on the phone, Bill Saunders's boy in Wytheville. He's short enough to look . . . Hmm." He tugged at his white beard, grinning. "Where's that old ratty Confederate uniform that belonged to your Great-uncle Claud, Lib? In the attic, is it? Well, get it out. . . . That Saunders boy won the high-dive contest at VMI last year, didn't he? Yes. Then, jumping off that lookout porch on the tower and landing deep in the river won't be much of a feat for him. Yes, hmm. Then he can swim underwater, and come up inside the shot well. Hide under the cauldron until young Mark stops looking for him to come up . . . !"

"Uncle Robert, you old faker—I *knew* you'd think of something!" Adelia burst out laughing, and hugged him, then went dancing around the high-ceiled bedroom where four generations of our kin had been

born, made love, had babies, and died. "I can't wait to see that smarty's face!" she exulted. "I just can't wait!"

Shadrach, with his glass of hot milk, had been fidgeting around in the background, his wide Negro-eyes flitting from one of our faces to the other. Suddenly he blurted:

"Marse Robert . . . s'posin' dey *is* a shot-tower ha'nt up yonder? Seem lak I reecollect dey *was* a little runty soldier what got one leg shot off at Murfreesboro. Name o' Jackson . . . and he *did* make shot up yonder in de tower. And he *did* jump off and git drownded!"

"Ah know that," Uncle Robert cut him short irritably. "Knew him personally; he was in my platoon. But he didn't jump. He. . . ."

"Yassuh. Got drunk and *fell* off'n de lookout porch," the old darkey recalled uncomfortably. "But dat wouldn't stop his sperrit from comin' back, if'n he took a notion. . . ."

"Oh, balderdash!" Uncle Robert roared at him. "There's no such thing as . . . as a spirit! Ghost, haunt, call it whatever you like! You know very well Ah . . . Ah simply make up these yarns to amuse the young folks."

"Yassuh." Shadrach subsided meekly; but his eyes were large and troubled in his wrinkled black face.

Adelia and I giggled and whispered half the night about our practical joke on Cousin Mark. We gobbled our waffles and wild honey as early as Aunt Cornelia would cook them, and spent the rest of the morning on the phone. Everyone in our little crowd had to be told about Uncle Robert's hoax, and since most of them rather disliked Cousin Mark for his abrupt and opinionated manner, all were looking forward to seeing him "taken down a peg."

At noon Bill Saunders turned up, a small freckled youth. He made two or three "practice dives" off the tower porch, disappearing from sight each time mysteriously and reappearing through the shot well, slime-covered and draped with cobwebs.

"Splendid, splendid!" Uncle Robert applauded, chuckling. "You're an excellent swimmer, my boy. . . . Well, Adelia?" His old eyes

twinkled as my cousin stood with her arm about his waist, watching the performance from the point below the tower where she and I were supposed to have seen the ghost a year ago.

"It's perfect!" she laughed. "Mark doesn't know you can swim underwater and come up inside the shot well. He'll be skeptical, of course, until our spook disappears into the river! Oh, when he goes back to Connecticut to visit his father's people, he'll certainly have a tale that will curl their hair!"

The day passed slowly under the weight of our young impatience. After dinner our friends began to turn up, by twos and fours, laughing and whispering together, and winking at Uncle Robert, who was enjoying his little jest immensely. As the long Virginia twilight began to fall, Adelia and I, in fluffy organdy, proposed an innocent-looking game of croquet under the big leafy maples on the lawn. Fireflies were beginning to wink and dart among the hedges. The sun had gone down below the distant blue-gray mountains, but a queer flat light lingered in the sky, giving everything the look of a stereopticon picture.

"Don't anybody dare to snicker and give us away," Adelia ordered. "I want Mark to think this is just another evening of fun and dancing. Unrehearsed. . . . Oh, I can't wait another minute!" she giggled, consulting the tiny wristwatch Uncle Robert had given her as a graduation present. "He's late! It'll be too dark in another half hour for him to see Bill. But I've painted him all over with luminous paint. . . . You don't suppose Mark's got cold feet and backed out on his bet?"

"Not that hard-headed stubborn Yankee!" I scoffed. "An earthquake wouldn't keep him from. . . . See?" I broke off, triumphant. "Here he comes now over the north hill!"

A solitary rider in white sport shirt and brown jodhpurs was indeed coming, hell-for-leather, over the far hill that separated our plantation from my aunt's remodeled home. The little bay mare Mark always rode took the hill at a hard gallop and plunged down the other side without slackening speed. A narrow creek with a fence rambling along its farther bank divided the "bottom land" where the cows and horses grazed. As we watched, holding our breath, my cousin spurred his

mount recklessly to take this precarious jump, ignoring the wide-open gate further down.

"Young idiot!" Uncle Robert muttered. "Rides like a damyankee. No consideration for the hoss. . . . Hah! He'll break his fool. . . ."

Even as he spoke the words, the little bay, sailing over creek and fence, caught a hoof on the top rail and fell head over heels. Her rider went sprawling, and did not rise, even after the mare scrambled to her feet and went galloping back home through the open gate.

Adelia and I gasped, and started to run in that direction. But as we reached the orchard gate, we saw Cousin Mark striding toward us along the narrow path past the springhouse. We waved, he waved back, and Adelia sniffed.

"He's okay," she said, almost resentfully. "Nothing could make a dent in that rhinoceros hide!"

But as he approached us, I saw that he looked very pale and dazed. There was a great dark gash across his forehead at the temple, and he limped slightly. With a twinge of remorse we beckoned, ready to call off our little joke. But Mark shook his head mockingly, and pointed to the shot-tower, turning his steps in that direction before he reached the orchard. He shouted something, but wind must have blown the sound away from us, for we could hear nothing but the faint quavering cry of a whippoorwill somewhere along the river.

Adelia stamped her foot. "See?" she exploded. "He's so smug, so sure of himself! Going to show us up for a bunch of superstitious nitwits! Just you wait . . . !"

We ran back through the orchard to join the others, lined up along the fence to watch Mark. Through the gathering dusk we could see his lone figure toiling up the hill toward the shot-tower, its bleak silhouette etched out sharply against the pale pink-and-gold of the western sky. White sheep dotted the green hillside, but as Mark picked his way among them, they did not start and run, but went on grazing, undisturbed.

We began to laugh and chatter excitedly as my cousin reached the point where the ghost could best be seen. Uncle Robert signaled surreptitiously with a flashlight, and instantly a foreshortened figure,

glowing with an eerie green radiance, appeared on the lookout porch. Laughing, we saw Mark stop short, staring up at the apparition.

Uncle Robert signaled again. Promptly a harsh quavering cry broke the evening stillness, heart-rending in its despair. The figure on the lookout porch, in gray Confederate uniform and forage cap, suddenly flung itself out into space. Screaming, it fell down, down, to disappear in the swirling river far below. We saw Mark standing on the riverbank, watching intently for the swimmer to bob up. When he did not, my cousin turned uncertainly, looking up and downstream, while we watched, bent double with mirth at his obvious bewilderment. He turned at last and entered the door of the shot-tower, evidently preparing to climb the spiral staircase and examine the lookout porch from which the specter had jumped. We fell upon one another, rocked with laughter.

But abruptly my cousin's figure reappeared and started limping down the hill. He reached the front gate and stood there, swaying slightly, very pale and disheveled, but smiling in mocking triumph. As Adelia opened the iron gate for him, questioningly, trying to keep her face straight and solemn, Mark began to laugh silently—and held out his hand, palm up.

At that instant a second dripping figure, in soggy gray uniform and minus the forage cap, was seen slogging down the hill. Bill Saunders reached us and leaned on the fence, grinning disgustedly and coughing a bit as if strangled. Most of the phosphorescent paint had washed off, and he glowed ludicrously only in spots on Uncle Claud's faded uniform.

"Bill!" Adelia wailed, half laughing. "Oh, shoot! What went wrong? How did Mark find out . . . ?"

"Aw-w!" Saunders ducked his head sheepishly. "I did it perfectly twice before! But *this* time I had to swim up under the wrong side of the shot cauldron! Got strangled and darn near drowned! Would have, if Mark hadn't heard me splashing around and caught me by the collar. . . ."

All eyes turned on my Cousin Mark then, standing there quietly in the gathering dusk, looking oddly weak and pale but smiling with

sardonic satisfaction. His hand was still held out mockingly, and Adelia flounced over to him, disgruntled.

"All right, General Grant!" she lashed out peevishly as Mark still did not speak. "Start rubbing it in, why don't you? You outflanked us! You won the bet . . . and I'm no welcher!" Her brown eyes twinkled suddenly. "But . . . I didn't say *where* you could kiss me—just on the cheek!" She turned her pretty face up to him, at the same time thrusting a crumpled bill into his hand; I gasped as I saw it was a worthless piece of 1864 currency we had found in the attic, along with Uncle Claud's uniform. "And here's your five," Adelia jeered. "I didn't promise I wouldn't pay off . . . in Confederate money!"

Mark smiled at her, a one-sided ironic little smile of reluctant admiration. He shrugged and bent to kiss her on the cheek. But abruptly he swayed, an expression of pain and confusion crossing his handsome face, now only a white blur against the darkness. One hand groped for the money Adelia held out, the other went to the dark gash in his forehead. And I saw my pretty cousin's face soften with tenderness.

"Oh, Mark!" she cried out. "You *were* hurt when your horse threw you! Why didn't you tell us, instead of going on with this silly bet we . . . ?"

Someone screamed—a rasping, high-pitched sound of utter terror. We all whirled toward the sound, startled. Shadrach, coming across the lawn gravely to find Uncle Robert, had halted abruptly. His darkey eyes were distended with horror, one black hand pointing shakily in our direction. We laughed, thinking he had seen Bill Saunders's glowing figure, and followed him into the house as he ran from us, still shrieking. But he locked himself in his room and no amount of coaxing would bring him out. Through the door, I heard muttered prayers.

In the hallway we noticed the phone, off the hook. Uncle Robert picked it up, and was startled by the sound of sobbing coming over the wire.

It was my aunt, a rather hysterical woman. Mark's horse, she said, had returned, riderless, to the stable. She was sure something had happened to him. Was he all right? Was he there with us?

Uncle Robert soothed her, assured her that Mark was with us, quite

uninjured, then called him to the phone to convince his mother.

There was no answer, other than the eerie cry of a distant whippoorwill. Mark had vanished, left abruptly—after collecting, Adelia remarked in a covert tone of disappointment, only the money-half of their little bet. We'd phone and tease him about that when he reached home, she laughingly said. . . .

But an hour later, my aunt called back. Mark had not arrived. When she called again frantically around midnight, a search was instituted. Toward morning they found his body.

He was lying, all crumpled up, where his little bay mare had thrown him when she fell. A quick examination showed that his right leg had been broken in two places; but mercifully, he had not had to lie there suffering all night. A blow on the temple, when his head struck a rock, had killed him—instantly, the coroner said.

Mark had been dead all that time. The coroner jeered at the fantastic account we told of his saving Bill Saunders's life, then collecting that bet from Adelia. A case of mass-hypnotism, he called it, induced by the fact that we were all so anxious for Mark's presence to complete our little hoax about the shot-tower ghost. He quoted the illusion of the Indian rope-trick as an example; how a group of people in broad daylight can be made to "see" a small boy climb a rope rising in midair, and disappear before their very eyes. "Psychic residue" and "ectoplasmic replica" were terms he had never heard . . . nor did anyone ever hear of them again from Uncle Robert's lips. He and Shadrach were thereafter conspicuously silent, exchanging a long look, whenever the supernatural was mentioned. And as for me, the cry of a whippoorwill at dusk still makes me shiver uncontrollably. . . .

For, there was one little item that the coroner could not explain. There was a crumpled five-dollar bill in my Cousin Mark's dead hand when they found him—a worthless piece of currency, printed by the Southern Confederacy in 1864.

NIGHT COURT

Bob waited, humming to himself in the stifling telephone booth, his collar and tie loosened for comfort in the late August heat, his Panama tilted rakishly over one ear to make room for the instrument. Through it he could hear a succession of female voices: "Gareyville calling Oak Grove thuh-ree, tew, niyun, six . . . collect. . . ." "Oak Grove. What was that number . . . ?" "Thuh-ree, tew. . . ."

He stiffened as a low, sweetly familiar voice joined the chorus:

"Yes, yes! I—I accept the charges . . . Hello? Bob . . . ?"

Instinctively he pressed the phone closer to his mouth, the touch of it conjuring up the feel of cool lips, soft blonde hair, and eyes that could melt a steel girder.

"Marian? Sure it's me! . . . Jail? No! No, honey, that's all over. I'm free! Free as a bird, yeah! The judge said it was unavoidable. Told you, didn't I?" He mugged into the phone as though somehow, in this age of speed, she could see as well as hear him across the twenty-odd miles that separated them. "It was the postponement that did it. Then they got this new judge—and guess what? He used to go to school with Dad and Uncle Harry! It was a cinch after that . . . Huh?"

He frowned slightly, listening to the soft voice coming over the wire;

the voice he could not wait to hear congratulating him. Only, she wasn't. She was talking to him—he grinned sheepishly—the way Mom talked to Dad sometimes, when he came swooping into the driveway. One drink too many at the country club after his Saturday golf. . . .

"Say!" he snorted. "Aren't you *glad* I don't have to serve ten to twenty years for manslaughter . . . ?"

"Oh, Bob." There was a sadness in his fiancée's voice, a troubled note. "I . . . I'm glad. Of course I'm glad about it. But . . . it's just that you sound so smug, so. . . . That poor old Negro. . . ."

"Smug!" He stiffened, holding the phone away slightly as if it had stung him. "Honey . . . how can you say a thing like that! Why, I've done everything I could for his family. Paid his mortgage on that little farm! Carted one of his kids to the hospital every week for two months, like. . . ." His voice wavered, laden with a genuine regret. "Like the old guy would do himself, I guess, if he was still . . . *Marian!* You think I'm not *sorry* enough; is that it?" he demanded.

There was a little silence over the wire. He could picture her, sitting there quietly in the Marshalls' cheery-chintz living room. Maybe she had her hair pinned back in one of those ridiculous, but oddly attractive, "pony-tails" the teen-agers were wearing this year. Her little cat-face would be tilted up to the lamp, eyes closed, the long fringe of lashes curling up over shadowy lids. Bob fidgeted, wanting miserably to see her expression at that moment.

"Well? Say something!"

The silence was broken by a faint sigh.

"Darling . . . what is there to say? You're so thoughtless! Not callous; I don't mean that. Just . . . *careless!* Bob, you've got to unlearn what they taught you in Korea. You're . . . you're home again, and this is what you've been fighting for, isn't it? For . . . for the people around us to be safe? For life not to be cheap, something to be thrown away just to save a little *time*. . . ."

"Say, listen!" He was scowling now, anger hardening his mouth into ugly lines. "I've had enough lectures these past two months—from Dad, from the sheriff, from Uncle Harry. You'd think a guy

twenty-two years old, in combat three years and got his feet almost frozen off, didn't know the score! What's the matter with everybody?" Bob's anger was mounting. "Listen! I got a medal last year for killing fourteen North Koreans. For gunning 'em down! Deliberately! But now, just because I'm driving a little too fast and some old creep can't get his wagon across the highway. . . ."

"Bob!"

". . . now, all at once, I'm not a hero, I'm a murderer! I don't know the value of human life! I don't give a hoot how many people I. . . ."

"Darling!"

A strangled sob came over the long miles. That stopped him. He gripped the phone, uncertainty in his oddly tip-tilted eyes that had earned him, in service, the nickname of "Gook."

"Darling, you're all mixed up. Bob . . . ? Bob dear, are you listening? If I could just *talk* to you tonight . . . ! What time is it? Oh, it's after *six!* I . . . I don't suppose you could drive over here tonight. . . ."

The hard line of his mouth wavered, broke. He grinned.

"No? Who says I can't?" His laughter, young, winged and exultant, floated up. "Baby, I'll burn the road . . . Oops! I mean. . . ." He broke off, sheepishly. "No, no; I'll keep 'er under fifty. Honest!" Laughing, he crossed his heart—knowing Marian so well that he knew she would sense the gesture left over from their school days. "There's so much to talk over now," he added eagerly. "Uncle Harry's taking me into the firm. I start peddling real estate for him next week. No kiddin'! And . . . and that little house we looked at. . . . It's for sale, all right! Nine hundred down, and. . . ."

"Bob . . . Hurry! Please!" The voice over the wire held, again, the tone he loved, laughing and tender. "But drive carefully. Promise!"

"Sure, sure! Twenty miles, twenty minutes!"

He hung up, chuckling, and strode out into the street. Dusk was falling, the slow Southern dusk that takes its time about folding its dark quilt over the Blue Ridge foothills. With a light, springy step Bob walked to where his blue convertible was parked outside the drugstore,

sandwiched between a pickup truck and a sedan full of people. As he climbed under the steering wheel, he heard a boy's piping voice, followed by the shushing monotone of an elder:

"Look! That's Bob Trask! He killed that old Negro last Fourth-o-July. . . ."

"Danny, hush! Don't talk so loud! He can hear. . . ."

"Benny Olsen told me it's his second bad wreck. . . ."

"Danny!"

". . . and that's the third car he's tore up in two years. Boy, you oughta seen that roadster he had! Sideswiped a truck and tore off the whole. . . ."

"Hmph! License was never revoked, either! Politics! If his uncle wasn't city commissioner. . . ."

Bob's scowl returned, cloudy with anger. People! They made up their own version of how an accident happened. That business with the truck, for instance. Swinging out into the highway just as he had tried to pass! Who could blame him for *that?* Or the fact that, weeks later, the burly driver had happened to die? From a ruptured appendix! The damage suit had been thrown out of court, because nobody could prove the collision had been what caused it to burst.

Backing out of the parking space in a bitter rush, Bob drove the convertible south, out of Gareyville on 31, headed for Oak Grove. Accidents! Anybody could be involved in an accident! Was a guy supposed to be lucky all the time? Or a mind-reader, always clairvoyant about the other driver?

As the white ribbon of highway unreeled before him, Bob's anger cooled. He smiled a little, settling behind the steering wheel and switching on the radio. Music poured out softly. He leaned back, soothed by its sound and the rush of wind tousling his dark hair.

The law had cleared him of reckless driving; and that was all that counted. The landscape blurred as the sun sank. Bob switched on his headlights, dimmed. There was, at this hour, not much traffic on Chattanooga Road.

Glancing at his watch, Bob pressed his foot more heavily on the accelerator. Six-fifteen already? Better get to Marian's before that

parent of hers insisted on dragging her off to a movie. He chuckled. His only real problem now was to win over Marian's mother, who made no bones of her disapproval of him, ever since his second wreck. *"Show me the way a man drives a car, and I'll tell you what he's like inside. . . ."* Bob had laughed when Marian had repeated those words. A man could drive, he had pointed out, like an old-maid schoolteacher and still be involved in an accident that was not legally his fault. All right, *two* accidents! A guy could have lousy luck twice, couldn't he? Look at the statistics! Fatal accidents happened every day. . .

Yawning, at peace with himself and the lazy countryside sliding past his car window, Bob let the speedometer climb another ten miles an hour. Sixty-five? He smiled, amused. Marian was such an old grandma about driving fast! After they were married, he would have to teach her, show her. Why, he had had this old boat up to ninety on this same tree-shaded stretch of highway! A driver like himself, a good driver with a good car, had perfect control over his vehicle at any. . . .

The child seemed to appear out of nowhere, standing in the center of the road. A little girl in a frilly pink dress, her white face turned up in sudden horror, picked out by the headlights' glare.

Bob's cry was instinctive as he stamped on the brakes, and wrenched at the steering wheel. The car careened wildly, skidding sidewise and striking the child broadside. Then, in a tangle of wheels and canvas top, it rolled into a shallow ditch, miraculously right side up. Bob felt his head strike something hard—the windshield. It starred out with tiny shimmering cracks, but did not shatter. Darkness rushed over him; the sick black darkness of the unconscious; but through it, sharp as a knife thrust, bringing him back to hazy awareness, was the sound of a child screaming.

"Oh, no ohmygodohgod. . . ." Someone was sobbing, whimpering the words aloud. Himself.

Shaking his head blurrily, Bob stumbled from the tilted vehicle and looked about. Blood was running from a cut on his forehead, and his head throbbed with a surging nausea. But, ignoring the pain, he sank to his knee and peered under the car.

She was there. A little girl perhaps five years old. Ditch water matted

the soft blonde hair and trickled into the half-closed eyes, tip-tilted at a pixie-like angle and fringed with long silky lashes. Bob groaned aloud, cramming his knuckles into his squared mouth to check the sob that burst out of him like a gust of desperate wind. She was pinned under a front wheel. Such a lovely little girl, appearing out here, miles from town, dressed as for a party. A sudden thought struck him that he knew this child, that he had seen her somewhere, sometime. On a bus? In a movie lobby . . . ? Where?

He crawled under the car afraid to touch her, afraid not to. She did not stir. Was she dead? Weren't those frilly little organdy ruffles on her small chest moving, ever so faintly . . . ? If he could only get her out from under that wheel! Get the car moving, rush her to a hospital . . . ! Surely, surely there was some spark of life left in that small body . . . !

Bob stood up, reeling, rubbing his eyes furiously as unconsciousness threatened to engulf him again. It was at that moment that he heard the muffled roar of a motorcycle. He whirled. Half in eagerness, half in dread, he saw a shadowy figure approaching him down the twilight-misted highway.

The figure on the motorcycle, goggled and uniformed as a state highway patrolman, braked slowly a few feet away. With maddening deliberateness of movement, he dismounted, flipped out a small report-pad, and peered at the convertible, jotting down its license number. Bob beckoned frantically, pointing at the child pinned under the car. But the officer made no move to help him free her; took no notice of her beyond a cursory glance and a curt nod.

Instead, tipping back his cap from an oddly pale face, he rested one booted foot on the rear bumper and beckoned Bob to his side.

"All right, buddy. . . ." His voice, Bob noted crazily, was so low that he could scarcely hear it; a whisper, a lip-movement pronouncing sounds that might have been part of the wind soughing in the roadside trees. "Name: Robert Trask? I had orders to be on the lookout for you. . . ."

"Orders?" Bob bristled abruptly, caught between anxiety for the

child under his car and an instinct for self-preservation. "Now, wait! I've got no record of reckless driving. I . . . I was involved in a couple of accidents; but the charges were dropped. . . . Look!" he burst out. "While you're standing here yapping, this child may be. . . . Get on that scooter of yours and go phone an ambulance, you! I'll report you for dereliction of duty! . . . Say!" he yelled, as the officer did not move, but went on scribbling in his book. "What kind of a man *are* you, anyway? Wasting time booking me, when there still may be time to save this . . . this poor little . . . !"

The white, goggle-obscured face lifted briefly, expressionless as a mask. Bob squirmed under the scrutiny of eyes hidden behind the green glass; saw the lips move . . . and noticed, for the first time, how queerly the traffic officer held his head. His pointed chin was twisted sidewise, almost meeting the left shoulder. When he looked up, his whole body turned, like a man with a crick in his neck. . .

"What kind of man are *you?*" said the whispering lips. "That's what we have to find out. . . . And that's why I got orders to bring you in. *Now!*"

"Bring me in . . . ?" Bob nodded dully. "Oh, you mean I'm under arrest? Sure, sure . . . but the little girl!" He glared, suddenly enraged by the officer's stolid indifference to the crushed form under the car. "Listen, if you don't get on that motorbike and go for help, I . . . I'll knock you out and go myself! Resisting arrest; leaving the scene of an accident. . . . Charge me with anything you like! But if there's still time to save her. . . ."

The goggled eyes regarded him steadily for a moment. Then, nodding, the officer scribbled something else in his book.

"Time?" the windy whisper said, edged with irony. "Don't waste time, eh? . . . Why don't you speed-demons think about other people's time before you cut it off? Why? *Why?* That's what we want to find out, what we *have* to find out . . . *Come on!*" The whisper lashed out, sibilant as a striking snake. "Let's go, buddy! *Walk!*"

Bob blinked, swayed. The highway patrolman, completely ignoring the small body pinned under the convertible, had strode across the

paved road with a peremptory beckoning gesture. He seemed headed for a little byroad that branched off the highway, losing itself among a thick grove of pine trees. It must, Bob decided eagerly, lead to some farmhouse where the officer meant to phone for an ambulance. Staggering, he followed, with a last anxious glance at the tiny form spread-eagled under his car wheel. Where had he seen that little face? *Where . . . ?* Some neighbor's child, visiting out here in the country. . . . ?

"You . . . you think she's . . . dead?" he blurted, stumbling after the shadowy figure ahead of him. "Is it too late . . . ?"

The officer with the twisted neck half turned, swiveling his whole body to look back at him.

"That," the whispering voice said, "all depends. Come on, you—snap it up! We got all night, but there's no sense wastin' time! Eh, buddy?" The thin lips curled ironically. "Time! That's the most important thing in the world . . . to them as still have it!"

Swaying dizzily, Bob hurried after him up the winding little byroad. It led, he saw with a growing sense of unease, through a country cemetery. . . . Abruptly, he brought up short, peering ahead at a gray gleam through the pines. Why, there was no farmhouse ahead! A fieldstone chapel with a high peaked roof loomed against the dusk, its arched windows gleaming redly in the last glow of sunset.

"Hey!" he snapped. "What *is* this? Where the hell are you taking me?"

The highway patrolman turned again, swiveling his body instead of his stiff, twisted neck.

"Night court," his whisper trailed back on a thread of wind.

"*Night* court!" Bob halted completely, anger stiffening his resolve not to be railroaded into anything, no matter what he had done to that lovely little girl back there in the ditch. "Say! Is this some kind of a gag? A kangaroo court, is it? You figure on lynching me after you've . . . ?"

He glanced about the lonely graveyard in swift panic, wondering if he could make a dash for it. This was no orderly minion of the law, this crazy deformed figure stalking ahead of him! A crank, maybe? Some

joker dressed up as a highway patrolman . . . ? Bob backed away a few steps, glancing left and right. A mental case, a crackpot . . . ?

He froze. The officer held a gun leveled at his heart.

"Don't try it!" The whisper cracked like a whiplash. "Come on, bud. You'll get a fair trial in this court—fairer than the likes of you deserve!"

Bob moved forward, helpless to resist. The officer turned his back, almost insolently, and stalked on up the narrow road. At the steps of the chapel he stood aside, however, waving his gun for Bob to open the heavy doors. Swallowing on a dry throat, he obeyed—and started violently as the rusty hinges made a sound like a hollow groan.

Then, hesitantly, his heart beginning to hammer with apprehension, Bob stepped inside. Groping his way into the darker interior of the chapel, he paused for a moment to let his eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Row on row of hardwood benches faced a raised dais, on which was a pulpit. Here, Bob realized with a chill coursing down his spine, local funeral services were held for those to be buried in the churchyard outside. As he moved forward, his footsteps echoed eerily among the beamed rafters overhead. . . .

Then he saw them. People in those long rows of benches! There seemed to be over a hundred of them, seated in silent groups of twos and threes, facing the pulpit. In a little alcove, set aside for the choir, Bob saw another, smaller group—and found himself suddenly counting them with a surge of panic. There were twelve in the choir box. Twelve, the number of a jury! Dimly he could see their white faces, with dark hollows for eyes, turning to follow his halting progress down the aisle.

Then, like an echo of a voice, deep and reverberating, someone called his name.

"The defendant will please take the stand . . . !"

Bob stumbled forward, his scalp prickling at the ghostly resemblance of this mock-trial to the one in which he had been acquitted only that morning. As though propelled by unseen hands, he found himself hurrying to a seat beside the pulpit, obviously reserved for one of the elders, but now serving as a witness-stand. He sank into the big chair,

peering through the half-darkness in an effort to make out some of the faces around him. . . .

Then, abruptly, as the "bailiff" stepped forward to "swear him in," he stifled a cry of horror.

The man had no face. Where his features had been there was a raw, reddish mass. From this horror, somehow, a nightmare slit of mouth formed the words: ". . . to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I . . . I do," Bob murmured; and compared to the whispered tones of the bailiff, his own voice shocked him with its loudness.

"State your name."

"R-robert Trask. . . ."

"Your third offense, isn't it, Mr. Trask?" the judge whispered dryly. "A habitual reckless driver. . . ."

Bob was shaking now, caught in the grip of a nameless terror. What was this? Who were all these people, and why had they had him brought here by a motorcycle cop with a twisted . . . ?

He caught his breath again sharply, stifling another cry as the figure of a dignified elderly man became visible behind the pulpit, where he had been half-shrouded in shadow. Bob blinked at him, sure that his stern white face was familiar—very familiar, not in the haunting way in which that child had seemed known to him, lying there crushed under his car. This man. . . .

His head reeled all at once. Of course! Judge Abernathy! Humorous, lenient old Judge Ab, his father's friend, who had served in the Gareyville circuit court . . . Bob gulped. In 1932! Why, he had been only a youngster then! Twenty years would make this man all of ninety-eight years old, if. . . . And it was suddenly that *"if"* which made Bob's scalp prickle with uneasiness. *If he were alive.* Judge Ab was *dead!* Wasn't he? Hadn't he heard his mother and dad talking about the old man, years ago; talking in hushed, sorrowful tones about the way he had been killed by a hit-and-run driver who had never been caught?

Bob shook his head, fighting off the wave of dizziness and nausea that was creeping over him again. It was crazy, the way his imagination

was running away with him! Either this was not Judge Ab, but some old fellow who vaguely resembled him in this half-light. . . . Or it *was* Judge Ab, alive, looking no older than he had twenty-odd years ago, at which time he was supposed to have been killed.

Squinting out across the rows of onlookers, Bob felt a growing sense of unreality. He could just make out, dimly, the features of the people seated in the first two rows of benches. Other faces, pale blurs against the blackness, moved restlessly as he peered at them . . . Bob gasped. His eyes made out things in the semi-gloom that he wished he had not seen. Faces mashed and cut beyond the semblance of a face! Bodies without arms! One girl. . . . He swayed in his chair sickly; her shapely form was without a head!

He got a grip on his nerves with a tremendous effort. Of course! It wasn't real; it was all a horrible, perverted sort of practical joke! All these people were tricked up like corpses in a Chamber-of-Commerce "horror" parade. He tried to laugh, but his lips jerked with the effort. . . . Then they quivered, sucking in breath.

The "prosecuting attorney" had stepped forward to question him—as, hours ago, he had been questioned by the attorney for Limestone County. Only . . . Bob shut his eyes quickly. It couldn't be! They wouldn't, whoever these people in this lonely chapel might be, they *wouldn't* make up some old Negro to look like the one whose wagon he had . . . had. . . .

The figure moved forward, soundlessly. Only someone who had seen him on the morgue slab, where they had taken him after the accident, could have dreamed up that woolly white wig, that wrinkled old black face, and . . . and that gash at his temple, on which now the blood seemed to have dried forever. . . .

"Hidy, Cap'm," the figure said in a diffident whisper. "I got to ast you a few questions. Don't lie, now! Dat's de *wust* thing you could do—tell a lie in dis-*yeah* court! . . . 'Bout how fast you figger you was goin' when you run over de girl-baby?"

"I. . . . Pretty fast," he blurted. "Sixty-five, maybe seventy an hour."

The man he had killed nodded, frowning. "Yassuh. Dat's about

right, sixty-five accordin' to de officer here." He glanced at the patrolman with the twisted neck, who gave a brief, grotesque nod of agreement.

Bob waited sickly. The old Negro—or whoever was dressed up as a dead man—moved toward him, resting his hand on the ornate rail of the chapel pulpit.

"Cap'm. . . ." His soft whisper seemed to come from everywhere, rather than from the moving lips in that black face. "Cap'm . . . *why?* How come you was drivin' fifteen miles over the speed-limit on this-yeah road? Same road where you run into my wagon. . . ."

The listeners in the tiers of pews began to sway all at once, like reeds in the wind. "*Why?*" someone in the rear took up the word, and then another echoed it, until a faint rhythmic chant rose and fell all over the crowded chapel:

"*Why? Why? Why? . . . Why? Why? Why?*"

"*Order!*" The "judge," the man who looked like the judge long dead, banged softly with his gavel; or it could have been a shutter banging at one of those arched chapel windows, Bob thought strangely.

The chanting died away. Bob swallowed nervously. For the old Negro was looking up at him expectantly, waiting for an answer to his simple question—the question echoed by those looking and listening from that eerie "courtroom." *Why?* Why was he driving so fast? If he could only make up something, some good reason. . . .

"I . . . I had a date with my girl," Bob heard his own voice, startling in its volume compared to the whispers around him.

"Yassuh?" The black prosecutor nodded gently. "She was gwine off someplace, so's you had to hurry to catch up wid her? Or else, was she bad-off sick and callin' for you . . . ?"

"I . . . No," Bob said, miserably honest. "No. There wasn't any hurry. I just . . . didn't want to. . . ." He gestured futilely. "I wanted to be with her as quick as I could! Be-because I love her. . . ." He paused, waiting to hear a titter of mirth ripple over the listeners.

There was no laughter. Only silence, somber and accusing.

"Yassuh." Again the old Negro nodded his graying head, the head

with the gashed temple. "All of us wants to be wid the ones we love. We don't want to waste no time doin' it. . . . Only, you got to remember de Lawd give each of us a certain po'tion of time to use. And he don't aim for us to cut off de supply dat belong to somebody else. They got a right to live and love and be happy, too!"

The grave words hit Bob like a hammer blow—or like, he thought oddly, words he had been forming in his own mind, but holding off, not letting himself think because they might hurt. He fidgeted in the massive chair, twisting his hands together in sudden grim realization. Remorse had not, up to this moment, touched him deeply. But it now brought tears welling up, acid-like, to burn his eyes.

"Oh . . . please!" he burst out. "Can't we get this over with, this . . . this crazy mock-trial? I don't know who you are, all you people here. But I know you've . . . you've been incensed because my . . . my folks pulled some wires and got me out of two traffic accidents that I . . . I should have been punished for! Now I've . . . I've run over a little girl, and you're afraid if I go to regular court-trial, my uncle will get me free again; is that it? That's it, isn't it . . . ?" he lashed out, half rising. "All this . . . this masquerade! Getting yourselves up like . . . like people who are dead . . . ! You're doing it to scare me!" He laughed harshly. "But it doesn't scare me, kid tricks like . . . like. . . ."

He broke off, aware of another figure that had moved forward, rising from one of the forward benches. A burly man in overalls, wearing a trucker's cap. . . . One big square hand was pressed to his side, and he walked as though in pain. Bob recognized those rugged features with a new shock.

"Kid . . . listen!" His rasping whisper sounded patient, tired. "We ain't here to scare nobody. . . . Hell, that's for Hallowe'en parties! The reason we hold court here, night after night, tryin' some thick-skinned jerk who thinks he owns the road. . . . Look, we just want t' know *why;* see? Why we had to be killed. Why some nice joe like you, with a girl and a happy future ahead of 'im, can't understand that . . . that *we* had a right to live, too! Me! Just a dumb-lug of a truck jockey,

maybe. . . . But I was doin' all right. I was gettin' by, raisin' my kids right. . . ." The square hand moved from the man's side, gestured briefly, and pressed back again.

"I figured to have my fool appendix out, soon as I made my run and got back home that Sunday. Only, you. . . . Couldn't you have spared me ten seconds, mac?" the hoarse whisper accused. "Wouldn't you loan me that much of your . . . your precious time, instead of takin' away all of mine? Mine, and this ole darkey's? And tonight. . . ."

An angry murmur swept over the onlookers, like a rising wind.

"*Order!*" The gavel banged again, like a muffled heartbeat. "The accused is not on trial for previous offenses. Remarks of the defense attorney—who is distinctly out of order—will be stricken from the record. Does the prosecution wish to ask the defendant any more questions to determine the *reason* for the accident?"

The old Negro shook his head, shrugging. "Nawsuh, Jedge. Reckon not."

Bob glanced sidewise at the old man who looked so like Judge Ab. He sucked in a quick breath as the white head turned, revealing a hideously crushed skull matted with some dark brown substance. Hadn't his father said something, years ago, about that hit-and-run driver running a wheel over his old friend's head? Were those . . . where those tire-tread marks on this man's white collar . . . ? Bob ground his teeth. How far would these Hallowe'en mummers go to make their macabre little show realistic . . . ?

But now, to his amazement, the burly man in trucker's garb moved forward, shrugging.

"Okay, your Honor," his hoarse whisper apologized. "I . . . I know it's too late for justice, not for us here. And if the court appoints me to defend this guy, I'll try. . . . Look buddy," his whisper softened. "You have reason to believe your girl was steppin' out on you? That why you was hurryin', jumpin' the speed-limit, to get there before she . . . ? You were out of your head, crazy-jealous?"

Bob glared. "Say!" he snapped. "This is going too far, dragging my fiancée's name into this . . . this fake trial. . . . Go ahead! I'm guilty of

reckless driving—three times! I admit it! There was no reason on this earth for me to be speeding, no excuse for running over that . . . that poor little kid! It's . . . it's just that I. . . ." His voice broke, "I didn't *see* her! Out here in the middle of nowhere—a child! How was I to know? The highway was clear, and then all at once, there she was right in front of my car. . . . But . . . but I *was* going too fast. I deserve to be lynched! Nothing you do to me would be enough. . . ."

He crumpled in the chair, stricken with dry sobs of remorse. But fear, terror of this weirdly made-up congregation, left him slowly, as, looking from the judge to the highway patrolman, from the old Negro to the trucker, he saw only pity in their faces, and a kind of sad bewilderment.

"But—why? Why need it happen?" the elderly judge asked softly, in a stern voice Bob thought he could remember from childhood. "Why does it go on and on? This senseless slaughter! If we could only *understand* . . .! If we could only make the living understand, and stop and think, before it's too late for . . . another such as we. There is no such thing as an accidental death! Accidents are murders—because someone could have prevented them!"

The white-haired man sighed, like a soft wind blowing through the chapel. The sigh was caught up by others, until it rose and fell like a wailing gust echoing among the rafters.

Bob shivered, hunched in his chair. The hollow eyes of the judge fixed themselves on him, stern but pitying. He hung his head, and buried his face in his hands, smearing blood from the cut on his forehead.

"I . . . I . . . Please! Please don't say any more!" he sobbed. "I guess I just didn't realize, I was too wrapped up in my own selfish. . . ." His voice broke. "And now it's too late. . . ."

Silently, the shadowy figures of the old Negro and the burly truck driver moved together in a kind of grim comradeship. They looked at the judge mutely as though awaiting his decision. The gaunt figure with the crushed skull cleared his throat in a way Bob thought he remembered. . . .

"Too late? Yes . . . for these two standing before you. But the dead," his somber whisper rose like a gust of wind in the dark chapel, "the dead cannot punish the living. They are part of the past, and have no control over the present . . . or the future."

"Yet, sometimes," the dark holes of eyes bored into Bob's head sternly, "the dead can guide the living, by giving them a glimpse into the future. The future as it will be . . . unless the living use their power to change it! Do you understand, Robert Trask? Do you understand that you are on trial in this night court, not for the past but for the future . . . ?"

Bob shook his head, bewildered. "The . . . future? I don't understand. I. . . ." He glanced up eagerly. "The little girl! You . . . you mean, she's all right? She isn't dead . . . ?" he pressed, hardly daring to hope.

"She is not yet born," the old man whispered quietly. "But one day you will see her, just as you saw her tonight, lying crushed under your careless wheels . . . unless. . . ." The whisper changed abruptly; became the dry official voice of a magistrate addressing his prisoner. "It is therefore the judgment of this court that, in view of the defendant's plea of guilty and in view of his extreme youth and of his war-record, sentence shall be suspended pending new evidence of criminal behavior in the driver's seat of a motor vehicle. If such new evidence should be brought to the attention of this court, sentence shall be pronounced and the extreme penalty carried out. . . . Do you understand, Mr. Trask?" the grave voice repeated. "*The extreme penalty!* . . . Case dismissed."

The gavel banged. Bob nodded dazedly, again burying his face in his hands and shaking with dry sobs. A wave of dizziness swept over him. He felt the big chair tilt, it seemed, and suddenly he was falling, falling forward into a great black vortex that swirled and eddied. . . .

Light snatched him back to consciousness, a bright dazzling light that pierced his eyeballs and made him gag with nausea. Hands were pulling at him, lifting him. Then, slowly, he became aware of two figures bending over him: a gnome-like little man with a lantern, and a

tall, sunburned young man in the uniform of a highway patrolman. It was not, Bob noted blurrily, the same one, the one with the twisted neck. . . . He sat up, blinking.

"My, my, young feller!" The gnome with the lantern was trying to help him up from where he lay on the chapel floor in front of the pulpit. "Nasty lump on your head there! I'm the sexton: live up the road a piece. I heard your car hit the ditch a while ago, and called the Highway Patrol. Figgered you was drunk. . . ." He sniffed suspiciously, then shrugged. "Don't smell drunk. What happened? You fall asleep at the wheel?"

Bob shut his eyes, groaning. He let himself be helped to one of the front pews and leaned back against it heavily before answering. Better tell the truth now. Get it over with. . . .

"The . . . little girl. Pinned under my car—you found her?" He forced out the words sickly. "I . . . didn't see her, but. . . . It was my fault. I was . . . driving too fast. Too fast to stop when she stepped out right in front of my. . . ."

He broke off, aware that the tall tanned officer was regarding him with marked suspicion.

"What little girl?" he snapped. "There's nobody pinned under your car, buddy! I looked. Your footprints were the only ones leading away from the accident . . . and I traced them here! Besides, you were dripping blood from that cut on you. . . . Say! You trying to kid somebody?"

"No, no!" Bob gestured wildly. "Who'd kid about a thing like . . . ? Maybe the other highway patrolman took her away on his motorcycle! He. . . . All of them. . . . There didn't seem any doubt that she'd been killed instantly. But then, the judge said she . . . she wasn't even born yet! They made me come here, to . . . to try me! In . . . night court, they called it! All of them pretending to be . . . dead people, accident victims. Blood all over them! Mangled. . . ." He checked himself, realizing how irrational he sounded. "I fainted," his voice trailed uncertainly. "I guess when they . . . they heard you coming, they all ran away. . . ."

"*Night* court?" The officer arched one eyebrow, tipped back his cap, and eyed Bob dubiously. "Say, you *sure* you're sober, buddy? Or maybe you got a concussion. . . . There's been nobody here. Not a soul; has there, Pop?"

"Nope." The sexton lifted his lamp positively, causing shadows to dance weirdly over the otherwise empty chapel. A film of dust covered the pews, undisturbed save where Bob himself now sat. "Ain't been nary a soul here since the Wilkins funeral; that was Monday three weeks ago. My, you never saw the like o' flowers. . . ."

The highway patrolman gestured him to silence, peering at Bob once more. "What was that you said about another speed cop? There was no report tonight. What was his badge number? You happen to notice?"

Bob shook his head vaguely; then dimly recalled numbers he had seen on a tarnished shield pinned to that shadowy uniform.

"Eight something . . . 84! That was it! And . . . and he had a kind of twisted set to his head. . . ."

The officer scowled suddenly, hands on hips. "Sa-ay!" he said in a cold voice. "What're you tryin' to pull? Nobody's worn Badge No. 84 since Sam Lacy got killed two years ago. Chasin' a speed-crazy high school kid, who swerved and made him fall off his motor. Broke his neck!" He compressed his lips grimly. "You're tryin' to pull some kind of gag about *that?*"

"No! N-no. . . . !" Bob rose shakily to his feet. "I . . . I . . . Maybe I just dreamed it all! That clonk on the head. . . ." He laughed all at once, a wild sound, full of hysterical relief. "You're positive there was no little girl pinned under my wheel? No . . . no signs of . . . ?"

He started toward the wide-flung doors of the chapel, reeling with laughter. But it had all seemed so real! Those nightmare faces, the whispering voices: that macabre trial for a traffic fatality that had never happened anywhere but in his own overwrought imagination . . . !

Still laughing, he climbed into his convertible; found it undamaged by its dive into the ditch, and backed out onto the road again. He waved. Shrugging, grinning, the highway officer and the old sexton waved back, visible in a yellow circle of lantern light.

Bob gunned his motor and roared away. A lone tourist, rounding a curve, swung sharply off the pavement to give him room as he swooped over on the wrong side of the yellow line. Bob blew his horn mockingly, and trod impatiently on the accelerator. Marian must be tired of waiting! And the thought of holding her in his arms, laughing with her, telling her about that crazy, dream-trial. . . . Dead men! Trying him, the living, for the traffic death of a child yet to be born! "The extreme penalty!" If not lynching, what would that be? He smiled, amused. Was anything that could happen to a man really "a fate worse than death . . . "?

Bob's smile froze.

Quite suddenly his foot eased up on the accelerator. His eyes widened, staring ahead at the dark highway illuminated by the twin glare of his headlights. Sweat popped out on his cool forehead all at once. Jerkily his hands yanked at the smooth plastic of the steering wheel, pulling the convertible well over to the right side of the highway. . . .

In that instant, Bob thought he knew where he had seen the hauntingly familiar features of that lovely little girl lying dead, crushed, under the wheel of his car. "The extreme penalty?" He shuddered, and slowed down, driving more carefully into the darkness ahead. The darkness of the future. . . .

For, the child's blonde hair and long lashes, he knew with a swift chill of dread, had been a tiny replica of Marian's . . . and the tip-tilted pixy eyes, closed in violent death, had borne a startling resemblance to his own.

THE MONKEY SPOONS

The little shop seemed to have taken the musty, worm-eaten quality of furniture and relics it offered for sale. There was an all-pervasive odor of mildew and decaying wood. Dust motes whirled in a shaft of sunlight as the street door opened, with the hushed tinkle of a bell above the sedate gold letters: JONATHAN SPROULL, ANTIQUES.

The three young people who entered, arm in arm, looked as out of place in such a shop as three children at a board meeting. The girl, a vivacious brunette with a large diamond solitaire on her left hand, linked the two men together—one a tall, easy-going Norse blond, the other small, wiry, and dark, with sensitive features that resembled those of the girl. They stood for a moment, laughing and chattering together—but in lowered tones, somewhat subdued by the atmosphere of the old shop.

"No, no; not three rings, Bob. Rings are so trite," the girl was protesting. "What we want is something unusual—right, Alan? Something distinctive to link us three together always, like the Three Musketeers, and remind us of our undying. . . ."

She broke off with a stifled gasp as a stooped, wrinkled gnome of a man, a hunchback, scuttled out from the shadowy recesses at the rear

of the place. There was something spider-like about his appearance, until he smiled. Large luminous brown eyes beamed upon each of them in turn.

"I overheard," he murmured in a mellow, friendly voice that matched his eyes. "You are looking for some little memento?" His eyes drifted keenly to the girl. "Soon is your wedding day—yes?" he hazarded. "And you and your . . . your brother? . . . and your fiancé wish to buy some antique curio, in (revolting term!) triplicate? As a bond of love and remembrance?"

The trio glanced at one another, jaws dropping.

"Why—yes!" the girl laughed. "You must be psychic!"

"Observation, merely observation and deduction," the old proprietor chuckled pleasantly. "I have very little trade here, worse luck, and much time to meditate! . . . Now, what did you have in mind? Three identical snuffboxes, perhaps? Seventeenth century? Or what about lockets, Renaissance Italian, with your pictures in each? I have some that fold open in three sections. Two of them could be worn as watchfobs, of course," he smiled at the two utterly unlike but congenial young men.

They grinned back at him, wandering curiously among the cluttered displays of crow's-nest tables, hammered brass fire-dogs, old spinning wheels, and a hundred other reminders of generations past. Idly they wandered over to a showcase of antique silverware—ornate gold-and-silver sugar shells, pickle forks with tiny demons on the handle, little salt spoons, and graceful kris-shaped butter knives. The girl strolled away by herself, poking about with quiet fascination. Presently her eyes fell on a small, worn, black velvet case pushed half out of sight on a shelf. She leaned to open it, and called out eagerly:

"Look! Oh, Alan—Bob, look! I found some monkey spoons!" She beckoned to her brother and fiancé, then smiled across the shop at the old proprietor—whose sudden look of agitation she failed to notice. "These *are* monkey spoons, aren't they, Mr. Sproull? I've never seen any with a drinking monkey perched on the knop—it's always something stylized, a faun or a skull. These must be very old."

The two men moved to her side, fondly amused at her excitement.

The blond one, Bob, looked at the dark one, Alan, and spread his hands humorously.

"What on earth," he drawled, "are monkey spoons? Alan, if we're going to open that antique shop of ours, with my backing and Marcia's and your experience, you'll just have to brief me on these. . . ."

The brother and sister started explaining, both at once, interrupting each other. They gave up, laughing. Then suddenly Mr. Sproull stepped forward, edging unobtrusively between the three young people and the black velvet box.

"Monkey spoons," he explained diffidently, "were presented by the old Dutch patroons to honored guests and relatives, as late as the seventeenth century. They were mementoes of some occasion—a funeral, most often. As you can see from these very fine specimens—" Skillfully, he steered the trio away to another showcase, shutting the black velvet box behind him with a furtive gesture. "These," he pointed out one set of five, "are typical. Note the wide, shallow, fluted bowl of the spoon—very thin silver—bearing a hammered-out picture symbolic of funerals: a man on horseback delivering the invitations, with a churchyard in the background. These bear a likeness of St. Michael, weigher of souls on Judgment Day. This one has a picture of a mourner weeping over a cinerary urn. . . ."

"Br-r! Cheerful little trinkets, aren't they?" Bob laughed, resting one hand on Alan's shoulder and sliding his other arm about his fiancée's waist. "Mean to say they passed out these things at funerals, like flowers at a party?"

"Not exactly." Mr. Sproull smiled. "They were hung around the rim of the wassail bowl at the *Dood Feest*—'dead feast.' Something like the Irishman's wake. A small silver lozenge, the seal, was always welded at the center of the handle, engraved with the name of the deceased, and the dates of his birth and death. The handles are quite slender, as you see. They curl backwards like the end of a violin to form the knop—on which is mounted a silver faun, or a skull, or. . . ."

"Or a monkey?" the girl asked eagerly. "Why 'monkey' spoons, Mr. Sproull?" She drifted over to the black box again and picked up one spoon. "I've always wondered why they're called that."

"That," the old dealer shrugged his humped shoulders, "is an enigma among antique experts. One theory is that the monkey was simply a symbolic invitation to come and be gay at the *Dood Feest.* 'Eat, drink, and be merry,' you know, 'for tomorrow. . . .' *Zuiging der monkey* was an old Dutch expression meaning 'to get drunk'. . . ."

"Ugh!" Marcia's delicate nose wrinkled in distaste. "I certainly wouldn't want everybody getting soused at *my* funeral! They'll just have to sit around and cry soberly, or they'll get no monkey spoons from me! Remember that, now, Bob!" She laughed and planted a kiss on her fiancé's cheek.

"Hush!" Her brother, the more sensitive of the two men, shuddered visibly. "Marcia, don't be so morbid! People shouldn't joke about. . . ."

"Who's morbid?" the girl laughed more gaily, winking at Bob. "Oh, Alan, you're a sissy! Do come and look at these darling monkey spoons over here. Those with the drinking monkey are very rare—aren't they, Mr. Sproull? There are only three of these. . . ."

Her face lighted, and she whirled about at a sudden idea.

"Oh! Why don't we choose these for our keepsakes? I could have mine made into a scarf pin, Bob. Yours and Alan's could be watchfobs, or you could have them welded on silver cigarette cases! Some old Dutchman's funeral spoons! Wouldn't that be just too gruesome and clever? And," she added eagerly, "we can call our antique shop *The Three Spoons* . . . and people will drop in by the droves just to ask us why! . . . Bob, darling, please buy them!"

Her fiancé grinned at her fondly, winked at her discomforted brother, and reached for his checkbook with a light shrug.

"All right, my precious, all right! Anything your foolish little heart desires. . . . But, funeral spoons!" He roared with amusement. "What a gift from the groom to the bride! Mr. Sproull, how much are you asking for . . . ?"

He broke off, caught by the expression on the face of the hunchbacked antique dealer. Mr. Sproull looked frightened. There was no mistaking that quiver about his mouth, or the agitation in his kindly old eyes.

"I . . . I . . . Wouldn't you prefer something less expensive?" he blurted. "Those particular spoons are . . . almost a collector's item. Besides," he added in an oddly loud tone, "they are not mine to sell, really. *They are not mine!*"

He emphasized the words queerly, and glanced toward the dark rear of the shop as though he were speaking for the benefit of some skulking eavesdropper whom they could not see.

"The former owner," he lowered his voice again in apology, "was a Mrs. Haversham, an elderly widow. Her heirs have not yet been located. She . . . she died intestate about a month ago, shortly after buying the set of four monkey spoons at an auction. She kept one spoon, and left three of them with me to sell for her at a profit. Merely as her *agent,*" he emphasized sharply, with another odd glance toward a particularly dark corner. "She kept a fourth spoon, not wanting to part with her entire collection. She . . . she was asphyxiated in her garage," he added with apparent irrelevance. "Carbon monoxide gas from her car. An *accidental* death, of course!" he said quickly, again with that nervous glance into the shadows.

The girl Marcia, her fiancé Bob, and her brother Alan looked at one another significantly. The old hunchback was certainly peculiar, to say the least! *A borderline mental case,* Bob's raised eyebrows suggested. With a glance at his fiancée's disappointed expression, he became brisk and businesslike.

"Well—you have the legal right to sell the spoons, though. And collect your commission," he pointed out shrewdly. "How much?"

"Ah . . . five hundred dollars," Mr. Sproull murmured, then added with a manner of pleading: "That's exorbitant, of course, and I can find you something much more attractive for the price!"

"Exorbitant—you can say that again! For three little spoons?" The blond young man whistled good-humoredly, but uncapped his fountain pen.

"Er . . . that's five hundred dollars *apiece,*" Mr. Sproull said hurriedly. "For each spoon. . . . Now, I'm sure you wouldn't care to pay so much for a . . . a whim! Let me just show you. . . ."

Bob set his jaw stubbornly, giving the old dealer an oblique look.

"Mr. Sproull, don't you *want* to make this sale? Look. If you're trying to run up the price," he snapped, "just because my fiancée has taken such a fancy to. . . ." He broke off, grinned abruptly, and spread his hands in rueful defeat. "All right, you old pirate! Fifteen hundred it is!" He smiled indulgently at the girl beside him, who was shaking her head violently. "If it's something you really want, darling, you shall have it."

Old Mr. Sproull sighed deeply, with a tone of resignation rather than of satisfaction.

"The price," he said heavily, "is five hundred for the set, if you insist on buying it. . . . But I must tell you this, although I am sure you young people will laugh at me—or perhaps be even more intrigued by these . . . these devilish spoons! You see, they. . . ." Mr. Sproull gulped. "They are supposed to be cursed."

The two men did laugh, but the girl's face lighted up. She clapped her hands, as pleased as a child with its first jack-o-lantern.

"Oh—a *curse!* How marvelous! Why didn't you tell us before? Now I simply *must* have them!"

The old hunchback nodded, and shrugged. "As I predicted," he murmured, then doggedly: "The spoons are mementoes of the funeral of an old Dutch patroon—Schuyler Van Grooten; you'll see his name on the seals—who owned and tenant-farmed about half of the Connecticut Valley in the 1600s. Mrs. Haversham had an old Dutch diary written by one of his ancestors; I was able to translate only a few pages when I called at her home, but. . . . It seems there were thirteen spoons originally. Rather a significant unlucky number, as the patroon was secretly murdered by friends and relatives who would inherit his estate. One by one, the story goes, he caused six guilty ones to die—exactly as he himself had died. The remaining owners of the monkey spoons became frightened finally and gave theirs away, thereby escaping his vengeance. *But. . . .*"

"But anybody who owns the spoons inherits the curse? Is that it?" Marcia cried delightedly. "Alan, isn't it exciting? Oh Bob, do give Mr. Sproull a check before somebody comes in and buys our haunted

spoons right out from under our noses!''

The antique dealer looked at her, and sighed. He saw the girl's brother bite his lips, frowning. But the blond young man grinned at his fiancée, and wrote out a check for the three monkey spoons. Opening the black velvet box, he presented one of the spoons to Marcia with an exaggerated bow. The second he gave to Alan, holding it over his wrist like a proffered rapier. The third spoon he thrust carelessly into the pocket of his tweed coat.

Then, laughing at his horse-play, Marcia offered an arm to each of the two young men, and they marched out together, whistling in harmony, into the sunlit street.

Behind them, old Mr. Sproull—although he was not a very devout Catholic—crossed himself. He ran a finger around under his collar and inhaled noisily, aware all at once of the extreme stuffiness of his little shop. It was unusually *close* in here today, he thought; almost stifling. He scurried to a window and flung it open, gulping in lungfuls of cool autumn air . . . as if, for some reason, he found it *terribly hard to breathe.*

It was almost closing time, about a week later, when the bell over his door tinkled again and two of the attractive young threesome walked into his shop. Mr. Sproull scuttled forward to meet them, beaming in recognition. But his smile faded at sight of the grim expression on the blond man's face, and the stunned, swollen-eyed look of the pretty girl. She had been crying, the old dealer saw—and Bob, her fiancé, was tight-lipped and cold with anger.

''Yes?'' Mr. Sproull murmured hesitantly. ''You . . . were not satisfied with your purchase?'' An odd look of hope leaped into his eyes. ''You wish to return the spoons, perhaps? Of course, I shall be glad to refund your. . . .''

For answer, the blond young man thrust one of the delicate little monkey spoons under his nose, pointing to the tiny silver seal welded at the center of the handle.

''Is this your idea of a joke?'' he snapped.

The antique dealer blinked, and, putting on an old-fashioned pair of square-lensed spectacles, peered at the spoon. The blood ebbed slowly from his face.

"I . . . I don't understand," he stammered. "When I sold them to you, the inscriptions read: *Schuyler Van Grooten, Born August 3, 1586; Died June 8, 1631.* But now . . . now it reads *Alan Fentress, Born Sept. 14, 1924; Died Nov. 3, 1949. . . .* Why," he broke off, "that's yesterday!"

A sob burst from the girl, and she buried her face against her fiancé's shoulder, weeping wildly. Bob glared at Mr. Sproull.

"Yes!" he said harshly. "And Alan was drowned yesterday—November third, 1949! The death-date engraved on that damned. . . . *How the devil did you get hold of Alan's spoon?*" He towered over the old cripple threateningly. "You . . . sadistic old. . . . ! *You* took that seal off, didn't you? And welded the new one on, just to . . . to stir up some freak publicity and boom trade for your crumby little shop! But, Alan!" He ground out through clenched teeth. "Why did you have to pick on Alan? Because you knew he was moody and susceptible to suggestion? Because you knew he'd brood over your little hoax, not telling us? His painting wasn't going well lately . . . so you thought it would be a cinch to drive him to suicide! Out there in the lake yesterday, he . . . he just stopped swimming and went under. When I got his clothes from the locker room, I found this damned spoon you changed! Like a death-sentence . . . !"

Mr. Sproull gasped, looking first at the dead youth's angry friend, then at his grieving sister.

"Oh! Oh *no!*" he protested. "My dear young people, you surely don't accuse *me* of. . . . ? You're upset. Who wouldn't be? It's the curse," he said quietly. "Remember, I did my best to warn you. . . ."

"To plant your story, you mean!" the young man snarled. Glaring at him furiously, he lead the girl toward the door. "Come on, darling. I might have known we'd get no satisfaction out of this . . . this cold-blooded old ghoul! . . . But let me tell you," he threw back furiously at the antique dealer, "when I locate the engraver who changed that

inscription, or find out how you learned Alan's birth date . . . I'll come back here and kill you!''

The door slammed with an agitated jingle of the little bell. Mr. Sproull stood for a moment, wringing his hands miserably. He had liked those three light-hearted young people on sight, and would not for the world have wished harm to befall any of them. But . . . there were forces a crippled old man could not combat! Forces older than any item in his musty little shop. Older than logic. Older than time. . . .

''Oh, dear heaven!'' the hunchback moaned. ''Why didn't I tell them to give those other two spoons away? Melt them down, bury them—anything! If that diary had only told *how* Van Grooten died, perhaps I could have warned them to avoid. . . . But there were only hints! The writer never did come out and say. . . . But that young man is intelligent. Perhaps he could come to some conclusion that I've missed . . . !''

He turned and ran for the telephone directory, leafing through it hastily to find the name *Fentress* or *Milam,* the signature on the young man's check. For an hour he clung to the phone, calling every Fentress and Milam in the book—but there was no ''Robert'' Milam. Mr. Sproull tried the hotels, then the funeral homes to trace the dead brother, Alan. Finally he hung up, defeated, concluding that they were all from out of town. He sat staring at the telephone then, wringing his wrinkled old hands in the helpless anguish of one who can only wait . . . wait . . . for disaster.

But the period of waiting was not long.

Three days later, just at noon, the doorbell tinkled again. Mr. Sproull looked up from a six-branched candelabrum he was polishing, to see a disheveled figure swaying a few feet from him. It was Bob Milam, his face drawn and covered with a stubble of beard, his eyes bloodshot and puffy from drinking. In his hand he held an ugly little automatic.

Mr. Sproull caught his breath, and stood very still. Then, despite his own fear, he burst out:

"Oh, my poor young friend! The . . . the second spoon? Your . . . fiancée?"

The blond man's mouth twisted with pain and bitterness. For reply, he flung another of the monkey spoons at the old dealer's feet. Mr. Sproull stooped to pick it up. He paled, and nodded. The tiny oval seal on the handle was engraved to read:

Marcia Fentress
Born April 17, 1927
Died November 6, 1949

At the old man's nod, Bob's eyes narrowed. He said not a word, but the ominous click of the safety catch on his gun was eloquent enough. Yet there was more pity than terror in Mr. Sproull's face.

"*Ohh!*" His murmur of shocked sympathy had a genuine ring. "H-how did she . . . ?"

"My fiancée," the young man grated bitterly, "was terribly grief-stricken at her brother's death—you figured on that, too, didn't you? You insane, twisted . . . !" His voice broke on a sob of impotent rage. "Alan and Marcia were inseparable; we three were, in fact. Marcia couldn't sleep, so last night she took a big dose of sleeping pills. While. . . ." He gulped, then plunged on miserably, "While she was drugged, a . . . a very large beauty pillow on her bed fell over her face, somehow. She. . . . It wasn't the sleeping pills; she . . . smothered to death! The coroner called it an accident," he lashed out. "But I call it murder! You murdered Alan, too! I can't prove it, but I surely as hell can . . . !"

With a sob he leveled the gun at the old antique dealer's heart, his mouth working with hate and grief. At sight of his tortured young face, Mr. Sproull dabbed at his eyes, oblivious to his own danger.

"My poor, unfortunate young friend!" he murmured pityingly. "You can't believe I would cause such tragedy, for a few paltry dollars? I did not change those seals—but I cannot hope to persuade anyone as matter-of-fact as yourself to believe in . . . in the supernatural. The diary recounts that . . . that, when each guest at Van

Grooten's Dood Feest died, *their* spoons changed, too! Mrs. Haversham's seal altered also—the lawyer found it later among her effects, but assumed it to be the grim jest of some house-servant. . . ."

Bob Milam snorted derisively. But the murderous anger in his eyes ebbed slowly, and the gun in his hand wavered.

"You're insane," he said heavily. "Maybe you don't even realize you changed those seals. Maybe your twisted mind really believes all that silly guff about . . . some old Dutchman who. . . ."

His shoulders slumped all at once. He swayed, passing one hand over his bleary eyes. The gun in his other hand clattered to the floor. Suddenly he snatched the monkey spoon and flung it down the furnace grating.

"Insane," he mumbled. "I . . . I can't shoot a crazy, crippled old man in cold blood! But . . . oh, why did you do it?" he groaned, staring at the hunchback. "Why, Mr. Sproull? *Why?* My best friend, and then my fiancée? I'd gladly have signed over my whole bank account to you, if it was money you . . . !"

"Oh, *please!*" the antique dealer cried out in despair. "You *must* believe that I had no part in. . . . I tried to phone you, to warn you! Tried to figure out the *manner* of death, so you could avoid. . . . But they all died so differently! Mrs. Haversham, asphyxiated. Your friend, drowned. And your lovely fiancée. . . ." The old man's eyes widened suddenly. "Ah! Now I understand! It's true! It all ties together. . . . *Listen to me!*"

Bob Milam had turned unsteadily toward the door, but Mr. Sproull sidled after him like a small persistent crab and seized him by the arm.

"No, no! Wait! You must listen!" he gasped. "The diary mentioned that Schuyler Van Grooten was subject to 'sleeping fits'—a cataleptic. His intimate friends and relatives must have known that, but . . . but they . . . *wait!*" he begged. "*Your monkey spoon, where is it? You must give it away! At once!*" the old dealer insisted excitedly. "To . . . to some impersonal agency. The Scrap-metal Drive—yes, that's it! Get it out of your possession, or you, too, will . . . ! So much hate, such hunger for revenge hovers about them! Like a piece of metal that has been magnetized, they can actually draw disaster to anyone who. . . ."

But at that moment the blond young man jerked his arm loose and plunged out into the street, wanting only to get away from this crazy old man who had caused him so much grief in the space of a few short days. Mr. Sproull pattered after him, calling excitedly for him to wait. But by the time he reached the curb, Bob Milam had whistled down a passing cab and was climbing into it. The old hunchback hurried to the curb and strained to catch the address. But the young man was only telling the driver, wearily:

"Drive around. Just drive. Anywhere . . . I don't care."

The antique dealer's arms dropped to his sides limply in defeat. He watched the taxi speed out of sight, then turned and walked slowly, thoughtfully, back into his shop.

The evening paper, left under his door as usual, carried the story. A taxi was ambling along 187th Street, where wreckers were busy razing an old warehouse. Somehow the dynamite charge went off sooner than was intended . . . and a crumbling wall of bricks and mortar fell on the cab as it passed. The cabby managed to dig his way out. But the single passenger, an intoxicated young man identified as one Robert Milam of New Jersey, could not be pulled out of the wreckage for almost an hour. He was dead when frantic workmen did finally reach him—not crushed, but trapped without air in the rear seat of the taxi cab. . . .

And in his pocket the police found a peculiar-looking spoon, inscribed with his name, the date of his birth—and the very date of his death!

Mr. Sproull finished reading, then took off his square-lensed glasses and polished them with a hand that trembled. There was nothing, he mused philosophically, really nothing at all that he could have done to save those three nice young people, who had all three died the same way—fighting for breath; smothered to death by one agency or another. Just exactly as Mrs. Haversham had died, in her exhaust-filled garage.

And just as, centuries ago, an old Dutch patroon, one Schuyler Van Grooten, had died—clawing and screaming and gasping for breath in his coffin, awakened from one of his cataleptic trances to find that his greedy heirs had deliberately buried him alive. . . .

THE SMILING FACE

Sir Cedric Harbin, the British archaeologist, rolled his head from side to side irritably on the canvas cot. It was the scream of a *jaru*—jaguar—that had waked him this time. Two hours ago it had been the chittering of night-monkeys; half an hour before that, some other weird jungle noise.

From the supine position in which he had been lying for eight sweltering nights already, he glared up at the young Chavante native who was fanning him with a giant fern, to keep away the mosquitoes and the tiny vicious little *pium* flies that swarmed about him. At his look, the boy grinned apology and began to ply the "shoo-fly" with more energy, the capivara tooth in his pierced lower lip bobbing furiously. Harbin cursed, blinking away the sweat that kept trickling down into his eyes. He tried to sit up despite the adhesive strapped over his bare chest like a cocoon, but sank back with a groan.

Instantly the tent flap opened and a girl hurried in out of the humid night.

"Darling? I thought I heard you groaning. Are you in pain?"

"Not much. Just—bored! And disgusted! Haven't you gone to bed yet?"

Sir Cedric looked up at her wearily as she bent over him, gently mopping the sweat from his face and neck. She was small and blonde and exquisite, strikingly beautiful even in her rumpled shirt and jodhpurs. It was when she smiled, however, that one stopped seeing anything else. A quiet humor seemed to emanate from her broad, sweetly curved mouth and sparkling blue eyes, as though they invited one to share some joke that she knew and was about to tell. The Brazilian Indian boy beamed at her, visibly attracted. Harbin, her husband though he looked old enough to have been her father—caught at her hand gratefully.

"Diana," he sighed, "my dearest. How the devil you can be so bright and cheery, after the confounded mess I've made of this expedition? Walking into that boa constrictor like a—like a damned tourist who'd never set foot in the Mato Grosso interior!" He scowled in self-condemnation. "Don't know why I ever let the Foundation talk me into this jaunt, anyhow. On our honeymoon! What was I thinking of, dragging you into this steaming hell?"

"Now, now, darling!" Diana Harbin laid two fingers over his mouth. She lifted his head tenderly, gave him a sip of *herva maté* through a *bombilla* stuck in a gourd, then riffled through a month-old magazine. "Here; do try to read and relax. You can't go hunting your precious Lost City with three broken ribs, and that's all there is to it. So stop fretting about it! Mario has the situation well in hand."

A look flashed over Sir Cedric's middle-aged face. It was gone before his wife observed it, but she did notice a peculiar tense note in his voice.

"Mario—oh, yes," the archaeologist drawled. "Our handsome and dashing young guide."

"Handsome?" His wife laughed—so lightly that Sir Cedric gave her a quizzical look. "Is he? I hadn't noticed . . . Why Cedric!" She returned his look, eyes twinkling. "I do believe you're jealous! Of *Mario?*" She half closed her eyes, imitating the sultry attitude of a screen Romeo. "'Ah-h Senhora! You are like jongle orchid!'" she mimicked, then burst out laughing. "Darling, he's so corny!"

Harbin did not share her mirth. His gray eyes iced over, and narrowed.

"The devil!" he exploded. "Did he really say that to you? Insolent half-breed swine! Send him in here; I'll sack him right now!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" his wife laughed, kissing him on the forehead. "Cedric, don't be absurd. All Brazilians make passes at every North American girl they meet. It's—it's part of the Good Neighbor Policy!" She gave him another sip of the nutritious tea, looking fondly amused. "Mario," she pointed out, "is a very efficient guide. He's kept these war-happy Chavantes from traipsing off to start something with other tribes we've passed. He's kept a supply of *mandioca* and *rapadura,* without trading half our equipment to get it. And he's the only guide in Belém who had the vaguest idea how to reach that Lost City of yours—if there is one," she reminded dryly. "Remember, all you have as proof is that silly old paper in the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio. Mario doesn't believe it exists."

"Mario!" the archaeologist snorted. "If Lt.-Col. Fawcett and his sons died trying to find it in 1925, there must be something to— Oh, if only I were off this ridiculous cot!" he fumed. "We're only two days' march from the place; I'd stake my life on it! I—"

"Oh, well," his pretty wife patted his arm soothingly. "There'll be other expeditions, dear. We'll try again; but right now you must get well enough to be carried back to Belém. There may be internal injuries we don't know about. Ugh, that horrible snake! Dropping on you from that tree, crushing you—" She shuddered, then knelt beside him with a little sob, pressing his hand to her cool cheek. "Oh, Cedric, you might have been killed!"

Harbin relaxed, caressing her long wheat-blonde hair, the bitterness and frustration ebbing slowly from his face.

"My dearest," he murmured, "I'll never understand what a lovely little Yank like you ever saw in a crotchety, dried-up old—Limey like me! But my whole outlook was changed, that night at the Explorers' Club in Rio, when you turned away from that ass Forrester, and smiled. At *me!* When—when I first saw you smile, Diana, the most

wonderful thing happened. It was as though the—the sun had come up for the first time in my— Oh, rubbish!" Sir Cedric broke off, embarrassed. "Never was much at expressing my feelings."

"You're doing all right!" his wife whispered. "Remind me to tell you how I felt when I first met the famous Sir Cedric Harbin. Ah-ah!" She dodged his quick embrace. "Not now! After Mario and I get back from Matura with supplies. Darling, do go to sleep, so I can! We're starting at daybreak, you know."

Harbin returned her smile of gentle humor with a hungry possessive look. "All right. But you'll hurry back? I mean— Oh, dash it!"

His wife bent over to kiss him once more lightly. "Of course I will," she whispered. "Next Thursday is our first anniversary; we've been married a whole month! You don't really think I'd spend that day with Mario and a lot of grinning Tapirapés babbling *'Ticanto! Ticanto!'*—which isn't my idea of a snappy conversation to put in my diary!"

Sir Cedric chuckled and lay still, his eyes following Diana as she left the tent to complete plans for the short journey at dawn.

The river village of Matura, he knew, was only a few miles down the Rio das Mortes, the River of Death, which had once run red with the blood of a Portuguese party of mining engineers massacred by Indians. Now it boasted a small trading post, run by a fat one-eyed Dutchman. There Diana could send a wireless message via Belém to the Foundation, saying—Harbin sighed bitterly—that he was crippled up; that he had made a complete botch of the expedition. There also Mario could replenish their dwindling stock of supplies—coffee, quinine, *mandioca;* perhaps even a few trinkets for the new native bearers Mario had recently added to their party. The Chavantes had not appeared to like it much, but even their *capitão,* their chief, Burity, could see his men could not carry both the equipment and the injured white explorer on their return trip.

Harbin sipped his *maté,* and thought about the new porters. They were ugly, stunted little Indians—the four Mario had hired—their loin cloths dirty and ragged, their greasy black hair hanging long and snaky

under their braided headbands. They were Urubus—Sir Cedric frowned, trying to recall what the Inspector of Indians at Belém had said about that tribe; the "Vulture People," he had called them. Was it something about a history of cannibalism? Harbin could not remember. All four of the Urubus had been fully armed—with bows and five-foot arrows, with spears, and with blowguns—when the Brazilian guide had happened across their hunting party. In fact, a poisoned blowgun dart (presumably aimed at a silver and black iguana) had barely missed his shoulder, Mario had reported uncomfortably.

"And good riddance!" Harbin muttered half-aloud, glowering up at the patched roof of the tent. "Never did trust those pretty-boys where a woman's concerned! Not one as lovely as Diana—so young and romantic and impressionable."

"Hanh? Senhor speak?" The Chavante boy startled him, waving his fern rapidly and flashing white teeth in a dark brown Mongoloid face.

"What? Oh! Nothing. Just talking to myself," Harbin snapped. "Swat that damned tarantula over my head, will you? It's going to drop on me."

"Si, senhor!!" The boy hastened to obey, his solicitude born of the fact that Diana had promised him a pair of her husband's cuff links for his pierced ears.

Harbin closed his eyes, now lulled by the throbbing hum of frogs and cicada, now startled awake by the moaning hiss of a nearby anaconda or the splash of an alligator in the river washing sluggishly against the sandbank where they had made camp. Presently, in spite of the *pium* flies, Sir Cedric drifted into a troubled slumber—and a recurrent dream in which his lovely young wife was lost in a tangle of undergrowth and looped lianas. She kept calling him, calling and laughing, somewhere just ahead, just out of reach. And he slashed away helplessly at the green wall of jungle with a *facão,* a cutlass-like machete, which kept turning to flimsy rubber in his hand. . . .

When he awoke, torpid and headachy, the tent was steamy with mid-morning heat. The Chavante boy was setting his tray for breakfast—roast crane, *farinha* gruel sweetened with the toffee-like *rapadura,* and

coffee with fermented sugarcane. Harbin made a wry face, and squinted at the boy, whose black eyes were gleaming with a curious excitement. His calm voice, however, betrayed nothing.

"*Bon dia! Senhor durmiou bem?*" he inquired politely.

"*Muita bem,*" Harbin grunted, yawning. "Where's the Senhora? She had her breakfast yet?"

The boy smiled brightly, his face an inscrutable mask now, mysterious and unreadable as the jungle itself.

"*Senhora pé, pé,*" he announced, then elaborated in a painful combination of Portuguese and English. "Senhora es agone. Senhora, Senhor Mario. Es agone. Say let you esleep, you seeck, no wake."

"Oh! Gone already, have they?" Sir Cedric looked disappointed, then shrugged. "Well—they should be back by tomorrow at sundown. Matura's only a few miles down the river. They—" He broke off, puzzled again by the sly look of amusement on the Chavante boy's face. "Eh? What are you grinning about?" he demanded.

For answer, the boy ran to the door of the tent and beckoned. An older, nervous-looking Chavante—possibly the boy's father or older brother—entered warily, braced as to dash out again if the white man appeared angry.

"Senhor? Pliz?" the man stammered. He was Burity, the chief; Harbin recognized him suddenly from the dried palm frond stuck in his pierced lower lip, like a spiky beard from his hairless chin. "Senhor?" he began again. "Geev present? Geev present if Burity tell?"

"Tell what, you gibbering ape?" Sir Cedric snapped. He tried to prop himself up on his elbows, a sense of foreboding suddenly knotting his stomach muscles. "Yes? All right, all right—a present! Speak up!"

The Chavante chief swayed, steadying himself against the tent pole. He was drunk, Harbin perceived; a strong whiff of fiery native rum reached his nostrils. Twice Burity started to speak, blinked and grinned foolishly, then blurted out:

"Senhora. Senhora et Senhor Mario. Es no go *down* Rio, es go *op.* No go Matura. Es take boys—" He held up one finger, then two vaguely. "Es ron away, go Goyaz. Es no come bock."

"*What!*" Harbin wrenched himself to a sitting posture, oblivious of the pain that knifed through his broken ribs. "You're lying!" he roared. "I'll—I'll beat you to a pulp, you lying scum! I'll cut your tongue out for saying a thing like that!"

Burity cringed, shaking his head violently. "No lie! No lie, *Capitão!* Es atruth! Senhor *zangado?* No be *zangado* for Burity. Me no do *nada,* me *manso*—good Indian!"

Sir Cedric glanced about wildly for something to throw at him. But the Chavante whirled and darted out of the tent, followed by the explorer's angry curses.

Harbin fell back on his cot, breathing hard. Pain clutched at his chest under the strapping; he had probably torn loose those half-mended ribs again. The fury of complete helplessness wracked him for a moment. That Indian was lying; of course he was lying! Diana would no more desert him in this condition than—than— Or, would she? Could a middle-aged husband ever really be sure of a young and beautiful wife?

Sir Cedric forced himself to lie still, teeth clenched, fists knotted at his sides. The Chavante boy crawled out from behind a trunk where he had hidden, and began timidly fanning him again. Harbin waved him away irritably, then called him back.

"Boy—?" He hesitated, flushing at his own lack of reserve. "Boy, did you—? Do you happen to know which way my—the Senhor Mario went? Up river, or down?"

"No, *Capitão.*" The Indian boy lowered his eyes respectfully, but Harbin could detect a secret contempt in his impassive face.

"Is there anyone who could find out for me? A tracker? A tracker could tell which way the *batelão* took off, couldn't he?" Sir Cedric pressed.

"A tracker, *Capitão?*" The Chavante was standing before him, still outwardly respectful. "Yes; tracker tell. But—Brujo know more better. Ask Brujo look upon Senhora's *batelão.* Brujo see all theengs—today, yesterday, tomorrow."

"Bru—? Oh yes. Quite."

Sir Cedric suppressed a smile. This was not the first time he had heard marvelous powers attributed to the Brujos, the witch-doctors of

these Mato Grosso native tribes. The Inspector of Indians had advised him to take one along on this expedition—as arbiter, medico, and general adviser to his Chavante bearers. Brujos were usually old men with wrinkled faces and mystic eyes—half-crazed from addiction to *yagé,* the deadly topaz-green drug brewed from liana pulp. Murika, the Brujo of his Chavantes, was no exception.

But Murika, Harbin considered swiftly, would know about Diana and that sneaky Brazilian, if anyone would. All rumors, all remnants of local gossip, found their way quickly to those wise old ears—to be palmed off later on the credulous as knowledge gleaned from supernatural sources.

"Of course, Murika!" Sir Cedric nodded eagerly, snapping his fingers at the Indian boy. "Well? Go fetch him! At once!"

The young Chavante nodded and dashed out of the tent. He dashed back presently, but more reverently, holding the tent flap aside for a wizened old Indian to enter.

Murika was a very small man, for a Chavante, most of whom stood well above six feet. But there was something about his erect bearing, about the serene wrinkled face under that feathered headdress, which commanded respect. The old man's face and chest were heavily pigmented with red and black, blue-black stain from the *genipapo* fruit and red from the *urukú* berry. A jaguar skin, with the tail dragging, was wrapped around his skinny loins, and a great deal of stolen copper telegraph wire coiled around his arms from wrist to elbow. In his pierced lower lip was a rather large bone from a howler monkey, which affected his speech but slightly. He evidently knew no English at all, but spoke perfect Portuguese, probably learned at a Christian mission school before he took to black magic. His voice was deep and mellow like the music of a distant oboe, and Sir Cedric was impressed in spite of the smile that twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"Murika?" he greeted the old Indian haltingly. "I—I called you here to—to—"

The aged Brujo nodded matter-of-factly, stuffing some kind of fiber shreds into his cigar-holder-like pipe. He sat down cross-legged beside the explorer's cot and leaned back comfortably against the tent pole.

Without a word he closed his eyes, puffing slowly at the pipe. A peculiar acrid odor filled the tent, making Sir Cedric feel suddenly lightheaded and queer. He frowned, annoyed.

"Now, see here," he said. "I've no time for a lot of mumbo-jumbo. Just tell me if you know which way my—"

The Chavante boy hissed sharply, shaking his head and making a silencing gesture. On the opposite side of Harbin's cot, he whispered in obvious awe:

"Senhor—do not espeak! Brujo esmoke the *ayahuasca.* The drug of second sight—"

"Oh!" Sir Cedric snorted, impatient. "I've heard of that—damned lot of nonsense. Or," he smiled wryly, "maybe it isn't. Maybe it works something like sodium pentothal. Releases the subconscious mind. Helps dig out facts the conscious mind's forgotten. Hmmp!" He rolled over on his side, wincing, to watch the old man as he sat, swaying and smoking, in utter silence.

Presently, however, the Brujo's eyes opened. They had a weird doped look staring unseeingly at Harbin as though they gazed through him, through the stained tent walls, and farther, much farther, through the matted jungle outside. Very slowly the old witch-doctor began to speak, chanting a curious singsong now in Chavante, now in Portuguese. Harbin made out the Portuguese with an effort, but the Indian was beyond him.

"... They go toward the rising sun. The *batelão* moves slowly. There are three bearers, Chavantes. The Smiling One sleeps under the *toldo.* The man watches.... Now he shoots the gun, killing a blood-red *arara.* He brings the feathers to the Senhora. She laughs, thanking him and putting the feathers in her golden hair...."

Sir Cedric cursed, heaving himself upright again furiously. It was all a lot of silly patter, meaningless and without any foundation of truth, he told himself sickly. Or, was it? *Toward the rising sun,* the old man had said. Then the *batelão* was being paddled east toward Goyaz, just as Burity had said; not west to Matura. Did the Brujo know for certain, from tracks he had found along the riverbank amid a network of other spoors—the round cup-like tracks of jaguars, the broad three-toed

marks of a tapir, the splayed track of the capivara, those sheep-sized water-guinea-pigs of the jungle? Or was he only guessing?

"... Now she sings," Murika droned abruptly. "She sings this song, it is plain to hear. . . ." He began to hum. And Harbin's scalp prickled as he recognized the halting strains of "Never Try to Bind Me," from a Friml operetta, *The Vagabond King.* It was an old favorite of Diana's—the very tune she had been dancing to, with young Forrester, at the Explorers' Club that night—that night—

Amazingly, unbelievably, Murika was even singing the words now, although he knew not a phrase of English:

"Never try to bind me,
Never hope to know. . . .
Take me as you find me,
Love and let me go. . . ."

The sound of those words, their import so obviously meaningless to that wrinkled Chavante singer, stabbed at Sir Cedric like a knife thrust.

"Stop!" he yelled furiously. "That's—it's a lot of damned nonsense! How . . . how could you possibly hear them, if they set off down the river—or *up* the river, as you say—four or five hours ago?"

The old Brujo closed his eyes, for answer. In a few moments, when he opened them and looked at the white man again, their weird faraway look was gone. He rose from his cross-legged position and stood quietly beside Harbin's cot, waiting. Sir Cedric glowered at him, then shrugged and thrust a cheap plug of tobacco at the old Indian, who took it with a gracious air of bestowing a gift rather than of receiving one.

"Is there more which you wish to know, *Capitão?*" he asked softly. "Murika has looked into the past—and has seen the *padre* in Rio speaking the marriage vows. The *Capitão* drops the ring, in his eagerness to place it on the Smiling One's finger. A man with a golden moustache picks it up and gives it back to—"

Harbin started, his scalp prickling again. "Kimball!" he murmured. "He—he was my best man. And I did drop the ring. . . . How could you possibly know . . . ? Did you ever overhear Diana and myself . . . ?

That must be it," he broke off, surreptitiously mopping at his forehead. "Of course. Nothing . . . supernatural about it!"

Murika's bland expression did not change. He merely stood quietly, waiting, looking more sure of himself than Harbin had ever felt in his whole life. In fact, the quiet wisdom in that wrinkled face made him feel more unsure of himself now than ever.

"Do you desire that I shall look into the future, *Capitão?*" the old Chavante asked gently. "The *ayahuasca* sends the eyes in all directions. One is able to see what was, what is, and what is to be."

"The devil you can!" Sir Cedric snorted, more to convince himself than to scoff at Murika. "All right!" he snapped. "What *is* to be? My wife's run off with a damned Brazilian, you say. Is she coming back?"

Murika took another puff at the pipe, his eyes again taking on that opaque drugged look, the pupils widening until the iris had disappeared. Harbin watched him, fascinated, trying to feel amused and scornful, trying to deny that hollow, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Murika opened his eyes wide, swaying. His voice sounded very thin and echoing as he spoke, like the voice of one shouting down a mine shaft.

"I see. . . ." he intoned. "I hear . . . the Smiling One . . . screaming. It is written in the stars . . . that the *Capitão* may keep before him, for all the rest of his days, the smiling face of his senhora. But. . . ."

"Yes?" Harbin urged tensely, as the Brujo paused. "*Yes?*"

"But it is also written in the stars," Murika said thinly, "that the sight of it will drive the *Capitão* into madness. This I see, and no more."

Sir Cedric expelled a quivering breath. Rubbish, all of this, sheer rubbish. And yet. . . . That bit about Diana's favorite song, and the dropped ring. And Kimball's blond moustache—he and Diana had certainly never mentioned *that* in Murika's hearing, though it might have been only a clever bit of guesswork. Still—

He lay back on his cot, battling for self-control. At his sides his hands were clenched so tightly that his nails bit into his palms. Two drops of blood oozed from the broken flesh and ran down his wrists,

unfelt. But Murika noticed them, and approached the white man's cot. He made a few curious passes in the air with a monkey skull produced from somewhere under the folds of his jaguar skin, then laid the skull gently on Harbin's forehead.

"*Capitão,*" the old man said. "Forgiveness is better than vengeance. . . ."

The archaeologist jerked his head away savagely, the monkey skull bumping hollowly to the ground as he glared up at Murika.

"Get out of here!" he grated, sweat popping out on his forehead and upper lip. "What are you trying to do to me, lying here trussed up? Are you trying to drive me crazy? *Get out!*"

He wrenched himself up again, panting and cursing. The Chavante boy dodged behind his trunk again, but the old Brujo merely bowed slightly and backed toward the tent opening.

"Jealousy," he said in his soft mellow Portuguese, "is like a poison, *Capitão.* The Senhor stands where the trail forks. Think well!"

"*Get out!*" Harbin roared, hurling his gourd of *maté* at the old Indian's head. The missile described a peculiar curve as it neared its target, however, and fell harmlessly to the floor. Again the white man shivered; he had heard before how a Brujo can deflect the flight of an arrow or a blowgun dart. Impossible, of course.

He fell back, gritting his teeth against the pain of his ribs. Sweat poured from his forehead now; the tent was like a steam cabinet. From outside he could hear the faint splashing of an alligator somewhere upriver, the dismal hiss of a flock of *ciganas,* the mew of a hawk sailing enviously above where some of the bearers were shooting fish with their short bows and five-foot arrows barbed with the tails of *arrays*—sting-rays. Harbin's mind sailed upstream, following a *batelão* where a lovely blonde girl and a handsome young man sat very close together under the palm-thatched *toldo* awning. Perhaps they were kissing now; perhaps only clinging together, in the way of young lovers.

A groan escaped him, half rage, half pain. Diana, Diana. Of course it had been too good to be true. The first handsome, virile young idiot to come along, and she had left him—the glamour of his reputation worn thin, now that she had seen him make such a botch of this expedition.

He would never hold her again, never see that dazzling good-humored smile of hers that had caused the Chavantes to call her *Rissante,* the Smiling One.

Harbin's eyes chilled. Dammit, she was always smiling! Had she actually been cheerful and courageous, or was she merely laughing at him? These American girls, they were so light-hearted, so unconventional—unlike all the strait-laced British women he had known. Perhaps she had merely married him for a lark, planning all along to leave him when she became bored! Leave him to face all these grinning natives, to get back to Belém the best way he could—without a guide.

At the thought of Mario, Sir Cedric's face hardened. Damned insolent Brazilian! If he could follow them, if he could only get his hands around that tanned neck! His fingers flexed with the desire to kill, and suddenly he let out a roared command:

"Boy! *Boy!* Where the devil are you hiding?" The Chavante lad scrambled out from behind his trunk, quaking. "Get me Burity again!" Harbin snapped, then shook his head. "No, no—he wouldn't go. It's Urubu country. Ah—!" His eyes glittered. "Those new porters! Send them to me. *Now!*"

The Indian boy dashed off to obey, eager to placate and worried about that gift of cuff links. He was back with the four squat Urubus in five minutes, and Harbin looked them over, still quivering with rage. He blurted his order in Portuguese, then in a few halting words of Chavante, but the Vulture Men shook their heads, grinning foolishly. Harbin scowled, resorting to sign language.

"Senhora. . . ." He drew the form of a woman in the air. "Understand? I want you to . . . bring her *back,*" he made scooping motion toward himself.

The leader of the Urubus, a stocky, evil-eyed Indian with deep scars cut from eye corners to mouth corners, nodded suddenly, and jabbered a few words to the other three. They nodded eagerly, gabbling—and sounding for all the world, Harbin thought with a shudder, like the nauseous, hideous-looking birds they worshipped. The leader edged forward, beady eyes gleaming.

"*Turi?*" he asked slyly, then brought up an English word, pointing

to Harbin, then vaguely out into the jungle. "Mon?"

"Oh—the white man? Mario?" Harbin's face was contorted. "The devil with Mario!" he growled. "I don't care what you do to him!" He made a broad gesture of dismissal, at which the Urubu chief grinned delightedly, nodding and replying with a throat-cutting gesture. His face held the unholy delight of a child given permission to pull the wings off a fly.

Then they were gone, like a flock of gabbling scavenger-birds, and Harbin lay back on his cot, closing his eyes wearily. In a day or so the Urubus, in a light, fast *montaria,* could overtake the other, slower boat. And well, if they were cannibals, if that was what the Inspector of Indians had warned him, the devil with Mario! Luring a man's wife away from him as he lay helpless, unable to follow! Diana, they would bring back with them, and—well, he could take it from there.

Tears of reproach seeped from between Harbin's closed lids. Diana—how could she have done this to him? But she was such a child, easily impressed, overly romantic. Forgiveness? What was it old Murika had said about forgiveness being better than vengeance? Sir Cedric smiled wryly. Well, after a time, perhaps he would forgive her. They could build a life together, even with the memory of her having run off with that handsome guide standing like an impenetrable wall of jungle between them. It needn't, really. Harbin's drawn face became peaceful, almost eager. He was a civilized man, he told himself. The daily sight of his wife's smiling face would not, as Murika predicted, "drive him into madness." Probably, after he forgave her for this outrageous escapade, she would love him all the more, really love him.

"Acu!" one of the Chavantes in the river-shallows was shouting; he had evidently speared a *pirara*—or else been bitten on the bare leg by a man-eating *piranha,* those murderous little fish that could strip a man's skeleton in a few minutes. *"Acu!"* they were forever shouting, these savages—the word meaning "Hello!" or "Hooray!" or merely "Ouch!" according to the events of the moment. Harbin smiled at their simplicity.

Sighing, settling himself to wait and to forgive, the archaeologist drifted into a restless slumber, with the Chavante boy plying his giant

fern once more timidly. His eyes on Harbin's sleeping face were wide and shocked, and warily respectful now.

All night Sir Cedric dreamed of his lovely wife. All the next day, and the next two following, he lay docilely on his cot, taking the last of the quinine and eating what was brought him without a murmur. A hundred times, sentimentally, he made up speeches to chide Diana, ever so understandingly, for her unfaithfulness. She would cry, then fling her arms around his neck and beg him to forgive her. Which he would, Harbin told himself wearily, humbly. All he wanted was to have her back, smiling at him, smiling in the old way as if none of this had ever happened. A small prickle of conscience nagged him now and then, thinking of the Urubu's gesture when he spoke of Mario. Suppose Diana loved the blighter? Had he any right to—? But what sort of life would she lead with a jungle guide? Harbin snorted. Whatever the rotter was going to get, he richly deserved! Killing a man, or having him killed, for seducing your wife was the accepted thing, here in hot-tempered Brazil. Besides—Sir Cedric gave a hard laugh—he could say he hadn't really given that order to the Urubu chief; that the Indian had misunderstood him.

On the fifth day after the Vulture Men had set out, old Murika walked silently into his tent. He stood for a moment, staring curiously at the supine white man, then walked slowly over to him.

"*Capitão,*" he said softly, "you have given an order to the Urubu men, and it is not good. The Senhor stood at the forked trail, and he has taken the wrong turning."

Harbin started. Had the old blighter been hovering outside his tent, eavesdropping? He scowled, ordering the Brujo to leave with an impatient gesture. Arrogant old devil! Give them an inch and they'd take a mile!

But Murika did not leave. His large vague eyes were troubled, and again they had that faraway look. Again Harbin's nose wrinkled as he smelled the acrid odor of *ayahuasca,* from the Brujo's pipe. Murika was staring at him—and through him.

"I see . . ." the mellow voice intoned, "see . . . a Lost City, which the jungle has eaten. There are great blocks of stone, carven with

strange writing. The Smiling One stands before it, while the man takes her picture."

"The devil you say!" Sir Cedric pulled himself erect, glaring. "So the rotter's not only stolen my wife, but he's jumped the gun on my expedition, eh? Going to claim the credit for finding my—" His eyes glittered coldly. "Well, then—it's good enough for him, whatever they'll do to him!" he muttered under his breath. "I'm glad I sent them! I'm *glad!*"

Murika said nothing, but shook his head very slowly.

"They are but children," he said quietly. "Do not condemn the forest people, *Capitão,* if they do not understand. They go only to do the Senhor's bidding."

Harbin nodded impatiently, eyes narrowed. "All right. So I told them to kill him! What's it to you, you shriveled-up old fool?" he snapped, waving Murika from his tent. "Get out of here! They should be back here with my wife by tomorrow at sundown—and that's all I want!" he muttered. "I—I'll never let her out of my sight again, and that's certain! Romantic child. Doesn't know her own mind."

He reached for his gourd of *maté,* sipped at it, then lay still. Through the long sweltering jungle-night he lay, sleeping little, his heart pounding with eagerness. Through the steaming day he waited, trying to peruse the old magazine he had read through twice already. The pain in his ribs had subsided now; the broken ends of bone were knitting again. Well, the devil take his confounded ribs! Tomorrow he'd have the bearers lift him into the boat, and he and Diana would go back to civilization. They'd follow the river, even if it took longer. He'd not keep her here in this green hell another day longer than necessary. Back at Belém, in a decent hotel, he'd make her forget all about Mario. He'd shower her with presents, make subtle love to her.

Abruptly, a cry reached his ears. He had been straining for the sound, praying for it to come. The Urubus were back. Now, darting to the tent opening, his Chavante boy turned and nodded, wide-eyed and subdued.

"*Capitão?*" he announced, in a respectful whisper; almost as he addressed the Brujo, Harbin noted with a grin of self-satisfaction.

"*Capitão?* The—the Senhor Mario is not with them. The three bearers of our tribe were slain, or escaped. But—the Smiling One, they have brought back as the Senhor ordered."

"Oh? Good, good!" Sir Cedric mopped at his face, nervous and eager. "Have they landed? Send them in here. Hurry! *Hurry!*"

He braced himself for the sight of his wife, perhaps being dragged angrily in between two grinning Urubus. But the chief came in alone, to present him with a crumpled sheet of paper. Harbin frowned, reading it swiftly. His heart leaped. It was a note Diana had evidently been writing to him when the Vulture Men overtook them at the Lost City; a note proving her innocence, her loyalty, the love he had doubted.

Flushing, miserably ashamed but grateful, Harbin's lips moved, reading:

> My darling—
>
> I'm sending this message back by one of the Chavantes. By now you must know we didn't go to Matura, and never planned to go. I persuaded Mario to take me on to your Lost City, so your expedition need not be a flop. My dear, it seemed to mean so much to you, and I couldn't bear to see you looking so disgusted with yourself. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd stop me from trying it alone.
>
> Mario has taken some pictures, and I've copied a few hieroglyphics off the stones, also some pottery. Darling, you and Lieutenant-Colonel Fawcett and your silly paper in Rio were right. There's a sort of Temple here, Inca, I believe. The altar stone, for sacrifice, is inlaid with gold and silver—I wish you could see it. But I've made maps, and we can come back after your ribs ha—

The note broke off, significantly. Sir Cedric raised his eyes, looking up at the grinning Urubu, beaming down at him like an evil stunted child of some forest-demon. Again he nodded happily, pleased to have carried out the *Capitão*'s orders so well. Again he made the throat-cutting gesture—and suddenly, like a cold hand on his heart, Sir Cedric remembered what the Inspector of Indians had said about the Urubu tribe. Not a history of cannibalism. Of head-hunting!

Harbin swallowed on a dry throat. What had he caused his young wife to witness, what horrible rites? Would she ever forgive him, ever look at him again without a shiver of revulsion? Would she—?

"*Rissante?*" he asked hoarsely. "Where's—where's my wife?" He made the sign of a woman's body in the air hurriedly, pointing to himself. "Tell her to come in! Bring her here! Quickly!"

The Urubu grinned evilly, nodding several times like a small boy proud of the homework he was handing in to Teacher. He called out a few words of his dialect, and one of the other Indians entered, carrying a small wicker basket.

Even before he jerked off the lid and saw the shrunken thing inside—lips stitched together in a hideous travesty of a smile, the long blonde hair unbound and carefully brushed clean of blood-flecks—Harbin began to scream. . . .

A DEATH CROWN FOR MR. HAPWORTHY

Jonathan Hapworthy was not long for this world, four competent doctors had assured him. (A coronary condition.) But, as he was in his seventies, this did not disturb Mr. Hapworthy a great deal. He expected to die sometime; everyone did, and the terrors of hellfire did not frighten him. Mr. Hapworthy was an atheist—when he thought of religion at all as anything more than an interesting study in contrasts between, say, what the Buddhists and the Zoroastrians believe. He was a student of all theologies, but privately he did not for a moment believe in the hereafter.

When the body broke down, was his opinion, it simply stopped like a good watch that has ticked its last tick. Sometimes, rather wistfully, he wished that he did believe in a life after death; for it seemed to him that far too many people died before they were half finished living. But he had uncovered no facts in any of his studies with which he could convince himself—and Mr. Hapworthy believed only in the known and proven; though, for amusement, he liked to dabble in the supernatural.

However, disbelief in a system of rewards and punishments after death did not give one the right, he felt, to act like a stinker while one was among the living—if only because it was a damned stupid way to

live. He believed in everyone's doing whatever he liked, so long as it did not interfere too irreparably with the rights of others. And by that creed he lived: a tall, dignified old gentleman, at the age of seventy-four, with neat mild features, carefully parted white hair, and a pedantic way of speaking that reminded one of an old-school professor. He had never married, was an orphan, had few intimate friends, and seldom fraternized with anyone other than the sad-eyed Labrador retriever that trotted always at his heels. He had but one hobby—collecting amulets and charms; and he had but one ambition—to bequeath said collection to the Smithsonian Institution, and thereby perpetuate the name of Hapworthy in the same way that Mr. Carnegie had left his name for posterity to read above library doors all over the country.

Now, in his neat modest apartment in Washington, he sat gloating delicately over the showcases that lined every wall. It was his habit just before lunch to work up an appetite by looking over his treasures and reminding himself that no other single individual in the world had in his possession so many authentic curios pertaining to ancient, medieval, and modern magic. It did not occur to Mr. Hapworthy to connect the fact that he had already lived three years longer than the doctors said he could, with the fact that he had in his collection every known health-amulet in existence since the history of man. Nor did it strike him as significant that, the very day he had acquired a certain odd-looking gray rock, purported to be the immemorial "Philosopher's Stone" which could turn all base metals into gold, he had come into a sizable fortune from an uncle he never knew he had. By no means did it occur to him that, ever since his purchase of a peculiar bright gem, said to have been pried from the girdle of Venus, strange women often followed him on the street and were known to smile at him unduly. . . .

None of these things occurred to Mr. Hapworthy, and he would have laughed dryly, had anyone mentioned such ideas. Like religion, contiguous magic was something other people could believe in if they liked. Jonathan Hapworthy was merely a collector.

Putting on his hat at a square angle and taking up his cane, he made one more circle of his apartment living room, flicking dust from a tray of Egyptian scarabs, examining a display of High John the Conqueror

roots for signs of rot, and polishing the tarnish from a silver evil-eye charm that dated back to the Borgia era. There was nothing, Mr. Hapworthy thought proudly, that he did not have in the way of talismans purported to draw all good things to, and fend all bad things from, their possessor. One day the name "Jonathan Hapworthy" would be a synonym for knowledge of the supernatural, as one immediately thought "snakes" when one said "Ditmars." With his collection would go the book he was writing on the subject. Perhaps Smithsonian would give him a whole room in the museum, since he planned to endow it himself.

"Ah, well. Come along, Trevo," he called to his dog. "Lunch!"

Humming cheerfully to himself, Mr. Hapworthy strolled to the elevator and walked in. The cage did not descend at once, and he frowned in slight annoyance at the gawky hillbilly who had been hired during the illness of the regular operator.

"Well? Come, come, my good lad," Mr. Hapworthy prodded gently. "If I'm late to lunch, I shan't get a seat. . . ."

The boy turned, flushing in apology, and fumbled with a small candy box he had been peering into with such absorption that he did not see his passenger enter. Now, clumsily, he tried to shut the box and start the elevator with one gesture—the result being that box and contents tumbled to the floor at Mr. Hapworthy's feet. Being a polite man, he bent to retrieve it . . . and was startled to see a large round ball of white feathers, packed tight, each feather overlaying the whole as smoothly as a bird's wing. He reached for it, curious; but the boy cried out sharply:

"Don't! D-don't tech that, mister! Not afore ye say. *'Matthew, Mark, Luke, John'*. . . . I seen a man drap dead that-a-way, when I was a young'n . . . !"

Mr. Hapworthy withdrew his hand, amused, and allowed the boy to pick up his own belongings. His bored blue eyes had brightened visibly at the other's words, as the sad-eyed hunting dog at his leg might have perked up at the faraway honk of a mallard.

"What on earth is that thing?" he asked eagerly. "Some sort of hoodoo?"

The boy looked pained. "Nawsuh. Hoodoos is for niggers! This-

heah's a holy sign, belongin' to my Granny. She sont it to me to carry home to my maw when I go. . . . Ain't no mail de-livery closer'n ten mile from our cabin, and Maw she's down in her back, cain't walk hardly no piece. . . ."

Mr. Hapworthy, who was not versed in backwoods dialect, translated this with some difficulty. "Yes, but . . . what *is* it?" he persisted. "How did those feathers get packed together like that? Are they glued?"

"*Naw*suh!" The boy looked actively shocked. "You ever try to glue ary bunch o' feathers together? . . . The angels done this. Mean you ain't got nary death crown in your fambly? I swannee!" He clucked his tongue in sympathy, eyeing Mr. Hapworthy with pity not unmixed with disapproval. "I reckon," he commented, "none o' yore folks ever got to Glory. Hit ain't many of *our'n,*" he admitted kindly. "Jest Grandpaw. Pap, being as he died drunk in a ditch, never had his head on nary pillow. Don't reckon it'd a-done no good if he had, him bein' a sinner all his born days."

Mr. Hapworthy choked, but managed to keep a straight face as the elevator sank smoothly downward. "I'm afraid I still don't understand," he murmured. "Where do you get these . . . er . . . death crowns? Where do they come from?"

"Out'n the pillow where a good soul lays his head when he dies," the mountain boy said simply. "I reckon the angels ball up the feathers that-a-way, makin' a set o' wings in a hurry for the sperrit to fly to Heaven. When there's one in the pillow, it's sure a comfort to the fambly, knowin' their kin got to Glory all right. . . ."

Only by faking a fit of coughing was Mr. Hapworthy able to cover his mirth this time. He mopped his eyes with a silk handkerchief, polished his pince-nez, and set it firmly back on his nose. Then a canny gleam came into his eye.

"I don't suppose," he asked cautiously, "that you'd care to sell that . . . er . . . death crown of yours? For, say, fifty dollars?"

He saw the boy's eyes widen at the sum mentioned, perhaps more money than he had ever owned in his life. But the square chin came up, lips set in stubborn defense.

"Nawsuh. I don't reckon *anybuddy'd* sell ary death crown out'n their fambly. Why, it's be like . . . like sellin' the gravestone off'n a grave!"

"Oh. . . . Oh, I see." Mr. Hapworthy looked dashed, but he had by no means given up. He had only begun to fight! He was off on the quest of a new rare amulet, surely one that Smithsonian had never even heard of; a brand new one indigenous to the Southern mountains, though possibly having its origin—like many of the old hillbilly ballads and expressions—in Old English tradition. This was a real treasure, one he must not let escape his collection. Everyone had scarabs, fertility charms, health-amulets; but nowhere before in the learned tomes had he ever read about a death crown! A discovery of this sort could make him famous as a collector and a student of the occult. Mr. Hapworthy took a deep breath.

"A hundred dollars?"

The boy gasped, but set his jaw even more stubbornly. "Nawsuh. Not that we couldn't use the money, with Maw ailin' and all the young'ns to feed through the wintertime. . . ." He hesitated, then shook his head positively. "Nawsuh. Granny wouldn't like it a-tall. Nor Maw neither."

"*Two* hundred dollars?" murmured Mr. Hapworthy insidiously.

The youth cast a look at him, almost frightened. He clutched the box with its weird contents to his hollow chest, and shook his head violently. Then, as his temper started to speak again, he darted out of the elevator and vanished from sight through the service entrance, out of earshot and out of range of any further offers.

"Oh, *drat!* These superstitious numbskulls!" Mr. Hapworthy exploded.

The dog whined softly at his ankle, looking up anxiously to make sure his master's anger was not directed at him. Mr. Hapworthy patted him absently, thinking in rapid circles.

"I must have that thing, Trevo," he muttered furiously. "I simply *must!* It's a real find. Genuine Americana—while most of my talismans are of foreign origin. I've *got* to get that thing. By hook or by crook!"

But frustration was his lot that afternoon, for on his return from lunch he found the old elevator man had risen from his sickbed and resumed his work. The young hillbilly, of course, had been discharged.

"Oh, DRAT!" cursed Mr. Hapworthy. "Where did he go? Can you give me his local address?"

The elevator man shrugged. "Sorry, sir. He was living here, in the basement with the janitor. Maybe I can get you his home address. He did say something about catching a bus back to the farm. . . ."

Hours later, accompanied by the doleful-looking retriever in a carrying-case with his luggage, Mr. Hapworthy was on a cross-country bus headed for a little hill town, just barely on the map at all, called Big Thickety Creek. He alighted at a filling station—which turned out to be the bus station, business section, and residential district of Big Thickety. With some difficulty, he managed to check his luggage and hire a guide, who promised to take him over the mountain to the Turneys' sharecropped farm, and come back after him in two hours. During that period, Mr. Hapworthy was confident he could effect the purchase of the white-feathered "death crown" he coveted.

His hopes soared when the rickety Model T deposited him at his goal—a sagging two-room cabin in the center of a sparsely grown cornfield. There was an open "dogtrot," or hallway, connecting the two rooms. Outside in the packed-clay yard was a rundown well, a gourd-pole for martins (insurance against chicken-hawks, although there were no chickens now clucking around the impoverished-looking place), and a corncrib whose roof had fallen in.

Mr. Hapworthy knocked. At once a flock of perhaps nine ragged children swarmed about him out of nowhere, giggling, pulling at his neat knife-creased trousers, or merely staring. One screeched something, and a thin slattern of a woman came out of the kitchen-room, a bunch of turnip greens which she had been picking over held in one hand like an awkward bouquet. She ducked her head shyly, smoothed back her hair, and said formally:

"Howdy. Come in and set." Then: "You sellin' funeral insurance? We don't want none. . . ."

Mr. Hapworthy cleared his throat, said he was not selling funeral insurance, and made his way gingerly into the kitchen through a mass of giggling children. The poverty of the place struck him like a blow, though he could see the woman's pitiful attempts to keep her crowded little home clean and cheerful. The board floor was freshly scrubbed, and there were magazine pictures cut out and tacked on the wall everywhere. All the little girls' hair had been carefully braided with bows of red calico, and all the little boys' overalls had been neatly patched.

Mr. Hapworthy cleared his throat again. He was ill at ease and, never a man to mince words, came directly to the point.

"Your son Lute," he began. "I happened to see a . . . a death crown he was bringing from your . . . ah . . . your mother? I wondered if . . . ah . . . you'd cared to sell it. For inclusion in my collection of amulets and charms, to be displayed in the Smithsonian museum after my death. Ah. . . . My last offer was two hundred dollars. I'll make that three hundred, madam, and that's my last word. What do you say?"

The mountain woman was staring at him, trying hard, he saw, to follow his words, few of which she could understand. But she did comprehend the words "death crown" and "three hundred dollars." Light blazed in her thin tired face all at once, and Mr. Hapworthy saw her eyes sweep over the gaunt brood of children clustered about her, now quiet with wonder as he spoke.

"Lord help my time! Three hundred dollars?" the woman whispered. "I never seen more than a hundred, time I got my man's in-surance money, poor soul," she added piously. "Some say he wasn't no-count, but he suited *me* all right and the chillun. . . . But. . . . Why, I couldn't *sell* you no death crown, mister!" she said quietly and with a wistful regret that made Mr. Hapworthy feel more uncomfortable than ever. "Why, nawsuh. I don't say we don't need the money, right bad. But. . . . Paw's death crown? It wouldn't be right to sell nothing like that. . . ." She laughed lightly, scatting one of the younger children away from the hot wood stove. "Lutie come by and brung it a while ago, fore he tuck off to git him another job. In the

cotton mill, if he's lucky. He tole me some feller offered to buy it. We had us a good laugh about that," she smiled at her guest in complete friendliness. "I reckon," she murmured kindly, "you jest didn't know what hit *was,* likely."

"Er . . . no. No, I guess I didn't," muttered Mr. Hapworthy, completely chastened by the gentle reproof in this starved, weary mountain-woman's eyes. Faced even though she was with a winter of starvation for herself and her children, she evidently had her own standards, and clove to them with a simple integrity.

He fumbled with his hat; looked here and there to avoid that steady gaze. His eye fell on a large daguerreotype portrait of an old man with a gray beard and warm humorous eyes. It was hanging over the stove.

"That's . . . ah . . . that's your father?" he mumbled. "The one who . . . ?" He floundered, making conversation to bridge the silence. "You resemble him a great deal. And your son, Lute. The same eyes. . . ."

The woman's expression changed abruptly, all reproof gone. She beamed up at the portrait, then back at Mr. Hapworthy.

"Yessuh. That's Paw. He was a circuit rider. Preached all over these mountains, come rain or shine. A better man never lived—though he like to've got hisself unchurched, account of his notions. He had some idee that good souls could leave Heab'in and come back to earth, if there was something you tuck a fancy to do, to help them that was still livin'. Said you didn' *have* to set around and play the harp. . . . My! he talked real crazy. But he saved many a soul in his day. Anybuddy could talk to him, he was that homey. We knowed there'd be a death crown in *his* pillow when he passed on. . . ."

"Er . . . yes. Yes. Naturally." Mr. Hapworthy choked, looking up at the kindly face of the old man in the picture.

The light was not good—or perhaps it was only smoke from the wood stove that made it hazy. But he could have sworn one of those humorous eyes winked at him a split-second before he glanced away. He kept looking back at the portrait, warmed in a strange way, a little feeling of loneliness that had always haunted him vanishing at sight of it. Where had he seen such a face before? Oh yes—the Biblical beard;

that was it. It reminded him of the pictures of the Disciples on Sunday School cards he had seen as a child. Long ago—when he had believed in a number of things he knew now could not possibly exist. Santa Claus, fairies, angels beside one's bed. . . .

All at once Mr. Hapworthy did an impulsive thing, most unlike himself.

Sidling over to a crude kitchen table, he fumbled in his pocket for a moment, took out a wad of bills, and stuffed them behind a coffee can. He moved quickly, and no eyes in the room, except the pictured eyes over the stove, saw his gesture.

A few hours later, riding back toward Washington on the bus, Mr. Hapworthy was annoyed with himself. He had not only failed to acquire the object that he coveted most in the world, but he had given way to a maudlin impulse to help some stupid, ignorant people he had never seen before and would certainly never see again. There was no good reason, other than sloppy sentiment, why that woman would not sell her treasured "holy sign" for the edification of the American public! Why had he not insisted? He might, indeed, have given her a smooth sales talk about its being her "religious duty," or some such rot. An illiterate sharecropper would have been easy prey to his collecting ability. But instead . . . !

Mr. Hapworthy glared down at his feet, where the retriever lay curled up uncomfortably in his carrying-case. He lifted the lid, patted the silky head fondly to soothe his irritation . . . and a moment later toppled forward on his face.

Dimly, through the clutching agony around his heart, he was aware of excited fellow-passengers hovering over him; of the bus screeching to a stop in some nameless little town; of his being carried into a small dingy hotel. A fat, rather pompous doctor was located, who examined him with a great show of concern.

"Mr. . . . er . . . Hapworthy? Yes. Are your affairs in order, sir? You were aware of your condition, of course. . . . Who is your next of kin? I'm afraid . . . ah . . . this is it."

"Oh, *drat!*" said Mr. Hapworthy, thoroughly annoyed. Then he

shrugged. "Well—I suppose everyone must die sometime. . . . Yes, my affairs are in order. No relatives. Though you might notify my landlord as soon as possible," he added thoughtfully. "He'll want to be arranging for a new tenant. Oh, and I wish you'd ship my dog to him, if you will. He's very fond of duck-shooting, and Trevo here is a splendid hunter. Myself, I detest killing things."

"Er . . . yes." The doctor fumbled for words for a moment, then: "What is your faith, sir? You'll want a pastor, of course. . . . Or a priest? There's also a rabbi here in town. I'm a Methodist, myself," he added stiffly. "But my aunt is a Christian Scientist, if you . . . ?"

"Really?" whispered Mr. Hapworthy, drowsily interested through his sedative. "Remarkable creed—that all matter is merely a figment of mortal mind. Ridiculous, of course," he added chattily. "Though if it's any comfort to anyone, I'm the very last man to try and arouse logical doubts. . . . No, no," he waved airily. "If the Supreme Deity—if there is one, as all theologies seem to contend—doesn't know about my sins already, I don't see why recounting them to some poor overworked clergyman would change anything. Damned embarrassing custom, anyhow . . . !"

The doctor gasped, and compressed his lips. "Sir," he said severely, "this is hardly the time for blasphemy. You're *dying,* man! Don't you care what happens to your immortal soul after . . . ?"

"Poppycock," murmured Mr. Hapworthy pleasantly. "But I would like to have lived a bit longer. My collection isn't complete . . . !"

He sighed crossly, and closed his eyes. He never opened them again.

Lifting him up in readiness to draw the sheet over his face, it was the doctor who felt that peculiar lump in the pillow under the dead man's head. Assuming that the old fellow had hurriedly hidden his wallet there in his illness, as many travelers are wont to do, the physician ripped open the striped ticking and dug among the musty gray chicken feathers with which the pillow was stuffed.

But what his hand brought out was not a wallet, but a large round ball of feathers, so compactly put together that a pin could scarcely pierce its center nor fumbling fingers tear it apart. Each feather overlaid

its mate as neatly as though they had grown that way. . . . But they were not gray feathers like the rest of those in the hotel pillow.

They were white, pure white, like the feathers of a goose or a Leghorn pullet. Mr. Hapworthy would have recognized that particular ball of downy white, since he had unsuccessfully tried to purchase it for his collection as a curio. He would have understood how, miraculously, it had got in among the dirty Plymouth Rock feathers under his very irreligious head. He also would have understood *why*. . . .

And perhaps, lying there in death—quite chastened and amused and happy at being proved so wrong, by someone who had ignored his mind and looked into his heart—perhaps he did understand.

THE BLACK STONE STATUE

Directors,
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, Mass.

Gentlemen:

Today I just received aboard the *S.S. Madrigal* your most kind cable, praising my work and asking—humbly, as one might ask it of a true genius!—if I would do a statue of myself to be placed among the great in your illustrious museum. Ah, gentlemen, that cablegram was to me the last turn of the screw!

I despise myself for what I have done in the name of art. Greed for money and acclaim, weariness with poverty and the contempt of my inferiors, hatred for a world that refused to see any merit in my work: these things have driven me to commit a series of strange and terrible crimes.

In these days I have thought often of suicide as a way out—a coward's way, leaving me the fame I do not deserve. But since receiving your cablegram, lauding me for what I am not and never could be, I am determined to write this letter for the world to read. It

will explain everything. And having written it, I shall then atone for my sin in (to you, perhaps) a horribly ironic manner but (to me) one that is most fitting.

Let me go back to that miserable sleet-lashed afternoon as I came into the hall of Mrs. Bates's rooming-house—a crawling, filthy hovel for the poverty-stricken, like myself, who were too proud to go on relief. When I stumbled in, drenched and dizzy with hunger, our landlady's ample figure was blocking the hallway. She was arguing with a tall, shabbily dressed young man whose face I was certain I had seen somewhere before.

"Just a week," his deep, pleasant voice was beseeching the old harridan. "I'll pay you double at the end of that time, just as soon as I can put over a deal I have in mind."

I paused, staring at him covertly while I shook the sleet from my hat-brim. Fine gray eyes met mine across the landlady's head—haggard now, and overbright with suppressed excitement. There was strength, character, in that face under its stubble of mahogany-brown beard. There was, too, a firm set to the man's shoulders and beautifully formed head. Here, I told myself, was someone who had lived all his life with dangerous adventure, someone whose clean-cut features, even under that growth of beard, seemed vaguely familiar to my sculptor's eye for detail.

"Not one day, no sirree!" Mrs. Bates had folded her arms stubbornly. "A week's rent in advance, or ye don't step foot into one o' *my* rooms!"

On impulse I moved forward, digging into my pocket. I smiled at the young man and thrust almost my last two dollars into the landlady's hand. Smirking, she bobbed off and left me alone with the stranger.

"You shouldn't have done that," he sighed, and gripped my hand hard. "Thanks, old man. I'll repay you next week, though. Next week," he whispered, and his eyes took on a glow of anticipation, "I'll write you a check for a thousand dollars. Two thousand!"

He laughed delightedly at my quizzical expression and plunged out into the storm again, whistling.

In that moment his identity struck me like a blow. Paul Kennicott—the young aviator whose picture had been on the front page of every newspaper in the country a few months ago! His plane had crashed somewhere in the Brazilian wilds, and the nation mourned him and his co-pilot for dead. Why was he sneaking back into New York like a criminal—penniless, almost hysterical with excitement, with an air of secrecy about him—to hide himself here in the slum district?

I climbed the rickety stairs to my shabby room and was plying the chisel half-heartedly on my *Dancing Group,* when suddenly I became aware of a peculiar buzzing sound, like an angry bee shut up in a jar. I slapped my ears several times, annoyed, believing the noise to be in my own head. But it kept on, growing louder by the moment.

It seemed to come from the hall; and simultaneously I heard the stair-steps creak just outside my room.

Striding to the door, I jerked it open—to see Paul Kennicott tiptoeing up the stairs in stealthy haste. He started violently at sight of me and attempted to hide under his coat an odd black box he was carrying.

But it was too large: almost two feet square, roughly fashioned of wood and the canvas off an airplane wing. But this was not immediately apparent, for the whole thing seemed to be covered with a coat of shiny black enamel. When it bumped against the balustrade, however, it gave a solid metallic sound, unlike cloth-covered wood. That humming noise, I was sharply aware, came from inside the box.

I stepped out into the hall and stood blocking the passage rather grimly.

"Look here," I snapped. "I know who you are, Kennicott, but I don't know why you're hiding out like this. What's it all about? You'll tell me, or I'll turn you over to the police!"

Panic leaped into his eyes. They pleaded with me silently for an instant, and then we heard the plodding footsteps of Mrs. Bates come upstairs.

"Who's got that raddio?" her querulous voice preceded her. "I hear it hummin'! Get it right out of here if you don't wanta pay me extry for the 'lectricity it's burnin'."

"Oh, ye gods!" Kennicott groaned frantically. "Stall her! Don't let that gabby old fool find out about this—it'll ruin everything! Help me, and I'll tell you the whole story."

He darted past me without waiting for my answer and slammed the door after him. The droning noise subsided and then was swiftly muffled so that it was no longer audible.

Mrs. Bates puffed up the stairs and eyed me accusingly. "So it's you that's got that raddio? I told you the day you come—"

"All right," I said, pretending annoyance. "I've turned it off, and anyhow it goes out tomorrow. I was just keeping it for a friend."

"Eh? Well—" She eyed me sourly, then sniffed and went on back downstairs, muttering under her breath.

I strode to Kennicott's door and rapped softly. A key grated in the lock and I was admitted by my wild-eyed neighbor. On the bed, muffled by pillows, lay the black box humming softly on a shrill note.

"I n—n n—ng—ng!" it went, exactly like a radio tuned to a station that is temporarily off the air.

Curiosity was gnawing at my vitals. Impatiently I watched Kennicott striding up and down the little attic room, striking one fist against the other palm.

"Well?" I demanded.

And with obvious reluctance, in a voice jerky with excitement, he began to unfold the secret of the thing inside that onyx-like box. I sat on the bed beside it, my eyes riveted on Kennicott's face, spellbound by what he was saying.

"Our plane," he began, "was demolished. We made a forced landing in the center of a dense jungle. If you know Brazil at all, you'll know what it was like. Trees, trees, trees! Crawling insects as big as your fist. A hot sickening smell of rotting vegetation, and now and then the screech of some animal or bird eerie enough to make your hair stand on end. We cracked up right in the middle of nowhere.

"I crawled out of the wreckage with only a sprained wrist and a few minor cuts, but McCrea—my co-pilot, you know—got a broken leg and a couple of bashed ribs. He was in a bad way, poor devil! Fat little guy,

bald, scared of women, and always cracking wise about something. A swell sport."

The aviator's face convulsed briefly, and he stared at the box on the bed beside me with a peculiar expression of loathing.

"McCrea's dead, then?" I prompted.

Kennicott nodded his head dully, and shrugged. "God only knows! I guess you'd call it death. But let me get on with it."

"We slashed and sweated our way through an almost impenetrable wall of undergrowth for two days, carrying what food and cigarettes we had in that makeshift box there."

A thumb-jerk indicated the square black thing beside me, droning softly without a break on the same high note.

"McCrea was running a fever, though, so we made camp and I struck out to find water. When I came back—"

Kennicott choked. I stared at him, waiting until his hoarse voice went on doggedly:

"When I came back, McCrea was gone. I called and called. No answer. Then, thinking he might have wandered away delirious, I picked out his trail and followed it into the jungle. It wasn't hard to do, because he had to break a path through that wall of undergrowth, and now and then I'd find blood on a bramble or maybe a scrap of torn cloth from his khaki shirt.

"Not more than a hundred yards south of our camp I suddenly became aware of a queer humming sound in my ears. Positive that this had drawn McCrea, I followed it. It got louder and louder, like the drone of a powerful dynamo. It seemed to fill the air and set all the trees to quivering. My teeth were on edge with the monotony of it, but I kept on, and unexpectedly found myself walking into a patch of jungle that was *all black!* Not burnt in a forest fire, as I first thought, but dead-black in every detail. Not a spot of color anywhere; and in that jungle with all its vivid foliage, the effect really slapped you in the face! It was as though somebody had turned out the lights and yet you could still distinguish the formation of every object around you. It was uncanny!

"There was black sand on the ground as far as I could see. Not soft jungle-soil, damp and fertile. This stuff was as hard and dry as emery, and it glittered like soft coal. All the trees were black and shiny like anthracite, and not a leaf stirred anywhere, not an insect crawled. I almost fainted as I realized why.

"It was a petrified forest!

"Those trees, leaves and all, had turned into a shiny black kind of stone that looked like coal but was much harder. It wouldn't chip when I struck it with a fallen limb of the same stuff. It wouldn't bend; I simply had to squeeze through holes in underbrush more rigid than cast iron. And all black, mind you—a jungle of fuliginous rock like something out of Dante's *Inferno.*

"Once I stumbled over an object and stopped to pick it up. It was McCrea's canteen—the only thing in sight, besides myself, that was not made of that queer black stone. He had come this way, then. Relieved, I started shouting his name again, but the sound of my voice frightened me. The silence of that place fairly pressed against my eardrums, broken only by that steady droning sound. But, you see, I'd become so used to it, like the constant ticking of a clock, that I hardly heard it.

"Panic swept over me all at once, an unreasonable fear, as the sound of my own voice banged against the trees and came back in a thousand echoes, borne on that humming sound that never changed its tone. I don't know why; maybe it was the grinding monotony of it and the unrelieved black of that stone forest. But my nerve snapped and I bolted back along the way I had come, sobbing like a kid.

"I must have run in a circle, though, tripping and cutting myself on that rock underbrush. In my terror I forgot the direction of our camp. I was lost—abruptly I realized it—lost in that hell of coal black stone, without food or any chance of getting it, with McCrea's empty canteen in my hand and no idea where he had wandered in his fever.

"For hours I plunged on, forgetting to back-track, and cursing aloud because McCrea wouldn't answer me. That humming noise had got on my nerves now, droning on that one shrill note until I thought I would

go mad. Exhausted, I sank down on that emery-sand, crouched against the trunk of a black stone tree. McCrea had deserted me, I thought crazily. Someone had rescued him and he had left me here to die—which should give you an idea of my state of mind.

"I huddled there, letting my eyes rove in a sort of helpless stupor. On the sand beside me was a tiny rock that resembled a butterfly delicately carved out of onyx. I picked it up dazedly, staring at its hard little legs and feelers like wire that would neither bend nor break off. And then my gaze started wandering again.

"It fastened on something a few dozen paces to my right—and I was sure then that I had gone mad. At first it seemed to be a stump of that same dark mineral. But it wasn't a stump. I crawled over to it and sat there, gaping at it with my senses reeling, while that humming noise rang louder and louder in my ears.

"*It was a black stone statue of McCrea, perfect in every detail!*

"He was depicted stooping over, with one hand holding out his automatic gripped by the barrel. His stocky figure, aviator's helmet, his makeshift crutch, and even the splints on his broken leg were shiny black stone. And his face, to the last hair of his eyelashes, was a perfect mask of black rock set in an expression of puzzled curiosity.

"I got to my feet and walked around the figure, then gave it a push. It toppled over, just like a statue, and the sound of its fall was deafening in that silent forest. Hefting it, I was amazed to find that it weighed less than twenty pounds. I hacked at it with a file we had brought from the plane in lieu of a machete, but only succeeded in snapping the tool in half. Not a chip flew off the statue. Not a dent appeared in its polished surface.

"The thing was so unspeakably weird that I did not even try to explain it to myself, but started calling McCrea again. If it was a gag of some kind, he could explain it. But there was no answer to my shouts other than the monotonous hum of that unseen dynamo.

"Instead of frightening me more, this weird discovery seemed to jerk me up short. Collecting my scattered wits, I started back-trailing myself to the camp, thinking McCrea might have returned in my absence.

The droning noise was so loud now, it pained my eardrums unless I kept my hands over my ears. This I did, stumbling along with my eyes glued to my own footprints in the hard dry sand.

"And suddenly I brought up short. Directly ahead of me, under a black stone bush, lay something that made me gape with my mouth ajar.

"I can't describe it—no one could. It resembled nothing so much as a star-shaped blob of transparent jelly that shimmered and changed color like an opal. It appeared to be some lower form of animal, one-celled, not large, only about a foot in circumference when it stretched those feelers out to full length. It oozed along over the sand like a snail, groping its way with those star-points—*and it hummed!*

"The droning noise ringing in my ears issued from this nightmare creature!

"It was nauseating to watch, and yet beautiful, too, with all those iridescent colors gleaming against that setting of dead-black stone. I approached within a pace of it, started to nudge it with my foot, but couldn't quite bring myself to touch the squashy thing. And I've thanked my stars ever since for being so squeamish!

"Instead, I took off my flying-helmet and tossed the goggles directly in the path of the creature. It did not pause or turn aside, but merely reached out one of those sickening feelers and brushed the goggles very lightly.

"*And they turned to stone!*

"Just that! God be my witness that those leather and glass goggles grew black before my staring eyes. In less than a minute they were petrified into hard fuliginous rock like everything else around me.

"In one hideous moment I realized the meaning of that weirdly life-like statue of McCrea. I knew what he had done. He had prodded this jelly-like thing with his automatic, and it had turned him—and everything in contact with him—into shiny dark stone.

"Nausea overcame me. I wanted to run, to escape the sight of that oozing horror, but reason came to my rescue. I reminded myself that I was Paul Kennicott, intrepid explorer. Through a horrible experience McCrea and I had stumbled upon something in the Brazilian wilds which would revolutionize the civilized world. McCrea was dead, or in

some ghastly suspended form of life, through his efforts to solve the mystery. I owed it to him and to myself not to lose my head now.

"For the practical possibilities of the thing struck me like a blow. That black stone the creature's touch created from any earth-substance—by rays from its body, by a secretion of its glands, by God knows what strange metamorphosis—was indestructible! Bridges, houses, buildings, roads, could be built by ordinary material and then petrified by the touch of this jelly-like thing which had surely tumbled from some planet with life-forces diametrically opposed to our own.

"Millions of dollars squandered on construction each year could be diverted to other phases of life, for no cyclone or flood could damage a city built of this hard black rock.

"I said a little prayer for my martyred co-pilot, and then and there resolved to take the creature back to civilization with me.

"It could be trapped, I was sure—though the prospect appealed to me far less than that of caging a hungry leopard! I did not venture to try it until I had studied the problem from every angle, however, and made certain deductions through experiment.

"I found that any substance already petrified was insulated against the thing's power. I tossed my belt on it, saw it freeze into black rock, then put my wristwatch in contact with the rock belt. My watch remained as it was. Another phenomenon I discovered was that petrifaction also occurred in things in *direct contact* with something the creature touched, if that something was not already petrified.

"Dropping my glove fastened to my signet ring, I let the creature touch only the glove. But both objects were petrified. I tried it again with a chain of three objects, and discovered that the touched object and the one in contact with it turned into black rock, while the third on the chain remained unaffected.

"It took me about three days to trap the thing, although it gave no more actual resistance, of course, than a large snail. McCrea, poor devil, had blundered into the business; but I went at it in a scientific manner, knowing what danger I faced from the creature. I found my way again to our camp and brought back our provision box—yes, the one there on the bed beside you. When the thing's touch had turned it into a perfect stone cage for itself, I scooped it inside with petrified

branches. But, Lord! How the sweat stood out on my face at the prospect of a slip that might make me touch the horrible little organism!

"The trip out of that jungle was a nightmare. I spent almost all I had, hiring scared natives to guide me a mile or so before they'd bolt with terror of my humming box. On board a tramp steamer bound for the States, I nearly lost my captive. The first mate thought it was an infernal machine and tried to throw it overboard. My last cent went to shut him up; so I landed in New York flat broke."

Paul Kennicott laughed and spread his hands. "But here I am. I don't dare go to anyone I know just yet. Reporters will run me ragged, and I want plenty of time to make the right contacts. Do you realize what's in that box?" He grinned with boyish delight. "Fame and fortune, that's what! McCrea's family will never know want again. Science will remember our names along with Edison and Bell and all the rest. We've discovered a new force that will rock the world with its possibilities. That's why," he explained, "I've sneaked into the country like an alien. If the wrong people heard of this first, my life wouldn't be worth a dime, understand? There are millions involved in this thing. Billions! Don't you see?"

He stopped, eyeing me anxiously. I stared at him and rose slowly from the bed. Thoughts were seething in my mind—dark, ugly thoughts, ebbing and flowing to the sound of that *"i—n n—n ng—n ng!"* that filled the shabby room.

For, I did see the possibilities of that jelly-like thing's power to turn any object into black stone. But I was thinking as a sculptor. What do I care for roads or buildings? Sculpture is my whole life! To my mind's eye rose the picture of co-pilot McCrea as Kennicott had described him—a figure, perfect to the last detail, done in black stone.

Kennicott was still eyeing me anxiously—perhaps reading the ugly thoughts that flitted like shadows behind my eyes.

"You'll keep mum?" he begged. "Do that for me, old boy, and I'll set you up in a studio beyond your wildest dreams. I'll build up your fame as—what are you?"

His gray eyes fastened on my dirty smock.

"Some kind of artist? I'll show you how much I appreciate your help. Are you with me?"

Some kind of artist! Perhaps if he had not said that, flaying my crushed pride and ambition to the quick, I would never have done the awful thing I did. But black jealousy rose in my soul—jealousy of this eager young man who could walk out into the streets now with his achievement and make the world bow at his feet, while I in my own field was no more to the public than what he had called me: "some kind of an artist." At that moment I knew precisely what I wanted to do.

I did not meet his frank gray eyes. Instead, I pinned my gaze on that droning black box as my voice rasped harshly:

"No! Do you really imagine that I believe this idiotic story of yours? You're insane! I'm going to call the police—they'll find out what really happened to McCrea out there in the jungle! There's nothing in that box. It's just a trick."

Kennicott's mouth fell open, then closed in an angry line. The next moment he shrugged and laughed.

"Of course you don't believe me," he nodded. "Who could?—unless they had seen what I've seen with my own eyes. Here," he said briskly, "I'll take this book and drop it in the box for you. You'll see the creature, and you'll see this book turned into black stone."

I stepped back, heart pounding, eyes narrowed. Kennicott leaned over the bed, unfastened the box gingerly with a wary expression on his face, and motioned me to approach. Briefly I glanced over his shoulder as he dropped the book inside the open box.

I saw horror—a jelly-like, opalescent thing like a five-pointed star. It pulsed and quivered for an instant, and the room fairly rocked to the unmuffled sound of that vibrant humming.

I also saw the small cloth-bound book Kennicott had dropped inside. It lay half on top of the squirming creature—a book carved out of black stone.

"There! You see?" Kennicott pointed. And those were the last words he ever uttered.

Remembering what he had said about the power of the creature

being unable to penetrate to a third object, I snatched at Kennicott's sleeve-covered arm, gave him a violent shove, and saw his muscular hand plunge for an instant deep into the black box. The sleeve hardened beneath my fingers. I cowered back, sickened by what I had done.

Paul Kennicott, his arms thrown out and horror stamped on his fine young face, had frozen into a statue of black shiny stone!

Then footsteps were clumping up the stairs again. I realized that Mrs. Bates would surely have heard the violent droning that issued from the open box. I shut it swiftly, muffled it, and shoved it under the bed.

I was at my own doorway when the landlady came puffing up the stairs. My face was calm, my voice contained, and no one but me could hear the furious pounding of my heart.

"Now, you look a-here!" Mrs. Bates burst out. "I told you to turn that raddio off. You take it right out of my room this minute! Runnin' up my bill for 'lectricity!"

I apologized meekly and with a great show carried out a tool-case of mine, saying it was the portable radio I had been testing for a friend. It satisfied her for the moment, but later, as I was carrying the black stone figure of Paul Kennicott to my own room, she caught me at it.

"Why," the old snoop exclaimed. "If that ain't the spittin' image of our new roomer! Friend of yours, is he?"

I thought swiftly and lied jauntily. "A model of mine. I've been working on this statue at night, the reason you haven't seen him going in and out. I thought I would have to rent a room for him here, but as the statue is finished now, it won't be necessary after all. You may keep the rent money, though," I added. "And get me a taxi to haul my masterpiece to the express station. I am ready to submit it to the Museum of Fine Arts."

And that is my story, gentlemen. The black stone statue which, ironically, I chose to call *Fear of the Unknown,* is not a product of my skill. (Small wonder several people have noticed its resemblance to the "lost explorer," Paul Kennicott!) Nor did I do the group of soldiers commissioned by the Anti-War Association. None of my so-called

Symphonies in Black were wrought by my hand—but I can tell you what became of the models who were unfortunate enough to pose for me!

My real work is perhaps no better than that of a rank novice, although up to that fatal afternoon I had honestly believed myself capable of great work as a sculptor some day.

But I am an impostor. You want a statue of me, you say in your cablegram, done in the mysterious black stone which has made me so famous? Ah, gentlemen, you shall have that statue!

I am writing this confession aboard the *S.S. Madrigal,* and I shall leave it with a steward to be mailed to you at our next port of call.

Tonight I shall take out of my stateroom the hideous thing in its black box which has never left my side. Such a creature, contrary to all nature on this earth of ours, should be exterminated. As soon as darkness falls I shall stand on deck and balance the box on the rail so that it will fall into the sea after my hand has touched what is inside.

I wonder if the process of being turned into that black rock is painful, or if it is accompanied only by a feeling of lethargy? And McCrea, Paul Kennicott, and those unfortunate models whom I have passed off as "my work"—are they dead, as we know death, or are their statues sentient and capable of emotion? How does that jelly creature feel to the touch? Does it impart a violent electrical shock or a subtle emanation of some force beyond our ken, altering the density and structure of the flesh it turns into stone?

Many such questions have occurred to me often in the small hours when I lie awake, tortured by remorse for what I have done.

But tonight, gentlemen, I shall know all the answers.

SEVENTH SISTER

The night Seven Sisters was born, a squinch-owl hollered outside the cabin from sundown until the moment of her birth. Then it stopped its quavering cry. Everything stopped—the whippoorwills in the loblollies; the katydids in the fig tree beside the well; even the tree-frogs, burring their promise of rain as "sheet lightning" flickered across the black sky.

The row of slave cabins behind the Old Place looked ramshackle and deserted; had been deserted, for a fact, ever since Grant took Richmond. Daylight or a moon would have shown their shingle roofs fallen in and their sagging porches overgrown with jimson weed and honeysuckle. Only one cabin was livable now and inhabited. Dody, grandson of a Saunders slave, had wandered back to the Old Place, with a wife and a flock of emaciated little pickaninnies.

They had not thrived on odd-job fare in the city. So Dody had come home, the first year of the Depression, serenely certain of his welcome. He knew Cap'm Jim and Miss Addie would give them a cabin with a truck garden, in return for whatever sporadic labor was needed on the old rundown plantation smack on the Alabama-Georgia line.

That was in '29, six years ago. Miss Addie was dead now and

buried in the family cemetery on the south hill. Most of the land had been sold to meet taxes. Miss Addie's grandson, Cap'm Jim, alone was left. Cap'm Jim was a baby doctor in Chattanooga. He kept the Old Place closed up except for weekend trips down with his wife and two young sons.

The red clay fields lay fallow and uncultivated. The rail fences had fallen, and even the white-columned Place itself was leaky and in need of paint. Whenever Dody or Mattie Sue thought of it, they had one of the young-uns sweep the leaves and chicken-sign from the bare sanded clay of the front yard. But aside from that weekly chore, they had the deserted plantation all to themselves, and lived accordingly. The children grew fat and sassy on yams and chitterlings. Dody drank more homebrew and slept all day in the barrel-slat hammock. And Mattie cooked, quarreled, and bore another pickaninny every year. . . .

That is, until Seven Sisters was born.

That night a squinch-owl hollered. And somewhere beyond the state highway, a dog howled three times. More than that, one of the martins, nesting in the gourd-pole in front of the cabin, got into the house and beat its brains out against the walls before anyone could set it free.

Three Signs! Small wonder that at sundown Mattie Sue was writhing in agony of premature childbirth. Not even the two greased axes, which Ressie and Clarabelle—her oldest unmarried daughters; aged fifteen and seventeen—had placed under her bed to cut the pain, did any good.

"Oh, Lawsy—Mammy done took bad!" Ressie whimpered.

She hovered over the fat groaning black woman on the bed, eye-whites large and frightened in her pretty Negro face. Ressie had seen many of her brothers and sisters come into the world. But always before, Mattie Sue had borne as easily and naturally as a cat.

"Do, my Savior!" Clarabelle whispered. "We got to git somebody to midwife her! Aunt Fan. . . . Go 'long and fotch her, quick! Oh, Lawsy. . . ." she wailed, holding high the kerosene lamp and peering down at the woman in pain. "I . . . I'se sho skeered. . . . What you waitin' on, fool? Run! . . . Oh, Lawsy, Mammy . . . Mammy?"

Ressie plunged out into the night. The *slap-slap* of her bare feet trailed into silence.

The cabin's front room was very still. Save for the regular moaning of Dody's wife—and an occasional snore from Dody himself, drunk and asleep on the kitchen floor—there was no sound within. The other children were clustered in one corner, silent as young foxes. Only the whites of their eyes were visible against the dark. Clarabelle tiptoed about in her mail-order print dress, her chemically straightened hair rolled up on curlers for the church social tomorrow.

Light from the sooty lamp threw stunted shadows. The reek of its kerosene and the smell of Negro bodies blended with the pungent odor of peaches hung in a string to dry beside the window. Hot summer scents drifted in: sun-baked earth, guano from the garden, the cloying perfume of a clematis vine running along the porch rafters.

It was all so familiar—the smells, the night-sounds. The broken and mended furniture, discarded by four generations of Saunderses. The pictures tacked on the plank walls—of a snow-scene, of a Spanish dancer, of the President—torn from old magazines Cap'm Jim and Miss Ruth had cast aside. The last year's feed-store calendar, dated January 1934. The gilded wreath, saved from Miss Addie's funeral, now decorating the mantel with its purple and gilt ribbon rain-marred to read: ABID WI H MF.

Even the childbirth scene was familiar to all of Mattie's children except the youngest. And yet. . . .

There was an eerie quality about the night, throwing the familiar out of focus. The young-uns felt it, huddled, supperless, in the corner while Clarabelle fluttered ineffectually about the bed and its burden. It was so hot and oppressive, with a curious air of waiting. Even a rumble of thunder along the horizon sounded hushed and furtive.

And the screech-owl's cry drifted nearer.

The woman on the bed writhed and moaned again. Clarabelle twisted her black hands together, bright with pink nail polish—relic of the winters spent in Chattanooga as nurse for Cap'm Jim's youngest. She went to the open door for a fourth time, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps.

Aunt Fan had a cabin down the road about half a mile, and had washed for the Andrews as far back as anyone remembered. She was a church woman; in fact, one of her three husbands had been a preacher

before he knifed a man and got sent away to prison. If anyone could help Mattie Sue in her extremity, it would be Aunt Fan. . . .

The squinch-owl wailed again. Clarabelle drew a quick circle on the cabin floor and spat in it. But the moaning of her mother went on and on, incoherent, rising and falling as though in imitation of the owl's ill-omened call.

Clarabelle stiffened, listening. The hurried crunch-crunch of shod feet came to her ears at last. With a gasp of relief she ran out to meet the pair—Ressie, returning, and a tiny wizened old Negress with a wen in the center of her forehead, jutting out like a blunt horn.

"Aunt Fan, what I tell you? Listen yonder!" Ressie whimpered. "Dat ole squinch-owl been holl'in' fit to be tied ever since sundown!"

The old midwife poised on the porch step, head cocked. She grunted, and with a slow, precise gesture took off her apron, to don it again wrong-side out.

"Dah. Dat oughta fix 'im. What-at Mattie Sue? My land o' Goshen, dat young-un don't b'long to get borned for two month yet! She been workin' in de garden?"

"Well'm. . . ." Clarabelle started to lie, then nodded, contrite. "Seem like she did do a little weedin' yestiddy. . . ."

"Uh-huh! So dat's hit! I done tole her! Dat low-down triflin' Dody. . . ." Aunt Fan, with a snort that included all men, switched into the cabin.

Outside, the screech-owl chuckled mockingly, as though it possessed a deeper knowledge of the mystery of birth and death.

Ressie and Clarabelle hunched together on the front stoop. Through the door they could hear Aunt Fan's sharp voice ordering the pickaninnies out of her way into the kitchen. Mattie Sue's regular moaning had risen in timbre to a shrill cry. Clarabelle, squatting on the log step of the porch, whispered under her breath.

"Huh!" Ressie muttered. "Ain't no use prayin' wid dat ole squinch-owl holl'in' his fool head off! Oh, Lawsy, Clary, you reckon Aunt Fan can . . . ?"

The older girl shivered but did not reply. Her eyes, wide and shining from the window's glow, swept across the flat terrain. Fireflies twinkled

in the scrub pines beyond the cornfield. A muffled roar from above caught her ear once. She raised her head. Wing lights on a transport plane, racing the storm from Birmingham to Atlanta, winked down at her, then vanished in the clouds.

" 'Leb'm-thirty," she murmured. "Less hit's late tonight. . . . Daggone! If'n dat ole fool don't shet up his screechin'. . . ." She hushed herself, sheepishly fearful of her own blasphemy.

Of course there was nothing to all that stuff her mammy and Aunt Fan had passed down to them, huddling before the fire on rainy nights. Signs! Omens! *Juju*. . . . Cap'm Jim had laughed and told them, often enough, that. . . .

The girl started violently. From the cabin a scream shattered the night. High-pitched. Final.

Then everything was still. The tree-frogs. The quarreling katydids. The whippoorwills. The muttering thunder. A trick of wind even carried away the sound of the transport plane.

And the screech-owl stopped hollering, like an evil spirit swallowed up by the darkness.

A few minutes later Aunt Fan came to the door, a tiny bundle in her arms swaddled in an old dress of Mattie's. The girls leaped to their feet, wordless, eager.

But the old Negress in the doorway did not speak. She was murmuring something under her breath that sounded like a prayer—or an incantation. There was a sinister poise to her tiny form framed in the lighted doorway, silent, staring out into the night.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Clary honey . . . Ressie. You' mammy done daid. Wan't nothin' I could do. But . . . my soul to Glory! Hit's somep'm funny about dis gal-baby! She white as cotton! I reckon yo' mammy musta had a sin on she soul, how-come de Lawd taken her. . . ."

Clarabelle gasped a warning. A broad hulk had blotted out the lamplight behind Aunt Fan—Dody, awake, still drunk, and mean. A tall sepia Negro, wearing only his overalls, he swayed against the door for support, glowering down at the bundle in Aunt Fan's arms.

"Woods-colt!" Dody growled. "I ain't gwine feed no woods-

colt. . . . Git hit on out'n my cabin! I got eight young-uns o' my own to feed, workin' myself down to a frazzle. . . . Git hit on out, I done tole you!" he snarled, aiming a side-swipe at Aunt Fan that would have knocked her sprawling if it had landed.

But the old Negress ducked nimbly, hopped out onto the porch, and glared back at Dody. Her tiny black eyes glittered with anger and outrage, more for herself than for the squirming handful of life in her embrace.

"You Dody Saunders!" Aunt Fan shrilled. "You big low-down triflin' piece o' trash! I gwine tell Cap'm Jim on you! Jes' wait and see don't I tell 'im! Th'owin' Mattie's own baby out'n de house like she want nothin' but a mess o' corn shucks! And Mattie layin' daid in yonder. . . ."

Dody swayed, bleary eyes trying to separate the speaker from her alcoholic image.

"Daid? M-mattie Sue . . . my Mattie Sue done daid? Oh, Lawsy—why'n you tell me . . . ?"

His blunt, brutal features crumpled all at once, child-like in grief. He whirled back into the cabin toward the quilt-covered bed. "Mattie?" the three on the porch heard his voice. "Mattie honey? Hit's your Dody—say somep'm, honey. . . . Don't sull up like dat and be mad at Dody! What I done now? . . . Mattie . . . ?"

Clarabelle and Ressie clung together, weeping.

Only Aunt Fan was dry-eyed, practical. In the dark she looked down at the mewling newborn baby. And slowly her eyes widened.

With a gesture almost of repugnance the old woman held the infant at arm's length, peering at it in the pale glow from the open cabin door.

"My Lawd a-mercy!" she whispered. "No wonder Mattie Sue died a-birthin' dis-heah one! Makes no diff'rence if'n hit's a woods-colt or not, dis-heah chile. . . ."

She stopped, staring now at Clarabelle and Ressie. They paused in their grieving, caught by Aunt Fan's queer tone. The old woman was mumbling under her breath, counting on her black fingers; nodding.

"Dat ole squinch-owl!" Ressie sobbed. "I knowed it! If'n hit hadn't a-hollered, Mammy wouldn't. . . ."

"Squinch-owl don't mean nothin' tonight," Aunt Fan cut in with an odd intensity. "Eh, Lawd, hit's jes' stomp-down nachel dat a squinch-owl'd come around to holler at dis-heah birthin'. Nor neither hit wouldn't do no good to put no axes under Mattie's bed, nor do no prayin'. You know why? Dis-heah youn-un got six sisters, ain't she? Dat make she a seb'm-sister! *She gwine have de Power!*"

Like a solemn period to her words, a clap of thunder boomed in the west, scattering ten-pin echoes all over the sky.

"Yessirree, a seb'm-sister," Aunt Fan repeated, rubbing the wen on her wrinkled forehead for good luck. "Y'all gwine have trouble wid dis chile! Hit's a pyore pity she didn't die alongside she mammy."

Ressie and Clarabelle, saucer-eyed, peered at their motherless newborn sister, at her tiny puckered face that resembled nothing so much as a small monkey. But she was *white,* abnormally white! Paler than any "high yaller" pickaninny they had ever seen; paler even than a white baby. Her little eyes were a translucent watery pink. Her faint fuzz of hair was like cotton.

"De Lawd he'p us to git right!" Clarabelle whispered in awe. "What us gwine do wid her? Pappy won't leave her stay here—not no woods-colt, and *sho* not no seb'm-sister! Will you keep care of her, Aunt Fan? Anyways, till after de funeral?"

The old Negress shook her head. With flat emphasis she thrust the wailing bundle into Ressie's arms, and stumped down the porch step.

"Nawsuh, honey! Not me! Hit say in de Good Book not to have no truck wid no conjure 'oman. And dat little seb'm-sister of yourn gwine be a plain-out, hard-down conjure 'oman, sho as you born! . . . Jes' keep her out in de corncrib; Dody won't take no notice of her. Feed her on goat's milk. . . . Mm-mmm!" Aunt Fan shook her head in wonder. "She sho is a funny color!"

It was a month after Mattie's funeral before Cap'm Jim came down to the Old Place again with the boys and Miss Ruth. When he heard,

by neighborhood grapevine, that Dody's new baby was being hidden out in the corncrib like an infant Moses, he stormed down to the cabin with proper indignation.

He took one startled look at the baby, white as a slug that has spent its life in darkness under a rock. Pink eyes blinked up at him painfully. The little thing seemed to be thriving very well on goat's milk, but the corncrib was draughty and full of rats. Cap'm Jim attacked Dody with the good-natured tyranny of all Deep-Southerners toward the darkies who trust and depend upon them.

"I'm ashamed of you, boy!"—Dody was over ten years older than Dr. Saunders. "Making your own baby sleep out in a corncrib, just for some damn-fool notion that she's a hoodoo! And of course she is your own baby. She's just an albino; that's why she's so white."

Dody bobbed and scratched his woolly head. "Yassuh, Cap'm? Sho nuff?"

"Yes. It's a lack of pigment in the skin . . . er. . . ." Dr. Saunders floundered, faced by the child-like bewilderment in the big Negro's face. "I mean, she's black, but her skin is white. She. . . . Oh, the devil! You take that child into your cabin and treat her right, or I'll turn you out so quick it'll make your head swim!"

"Yassuh. . . ." Dody grinned and bobbed again, turning his frayed straw hat around and around by the brim. "Yassuh, Cap'm. . . . You ain't got a quarter you don't need, is you? Seem like we's plumb out o' salt and stuff. Ain't got no nails, neither, to mend de chicken house. . . ."

Dr. Saunders grunted and handed him fifty cents. "Here. But if you spend it on bay rum and get drunk this weekend, I'll tan your hide!"

"Naw*suh!*" Dody beamed, and guffawed his admiration of the bossman's unerring shot. "I ain't gwine do dat, Cap'm! Does you want me for anything, jes' ring de bell. I'll send Clarabelle on up to look after de boys."

Dody shambled off, grinning. Cap'm Jim let out a baffled sigh. He strode back toward the Place, well aware that Dody would be drunk on dime-store bay rum by nightfall, and that the big rusty plantation bell in the yard would clang in vain if he wanted any chores performed. But

he had laid the law down about the new baby, and that order at least would be obeyed.

"A pure albino!" he told his wife later, at supper. "Poor little mite; it's amazing how healthy she is on that treatment! They won't even give her a name. They just call her Seven Sisters . . . and cross their fool fingers every time she looks at 'em! I'll have to say, myself, she *is* weird-looking with that paper-white hair and skin. Oh, well—they'll get used to her. . . ."

Cap'm Jim laughed, shrugged, and helped himself to some more watermelon pickle.

Dody, with his fifty cents, rode mule-back to the nearest town five miles away. In a fatherly moment, while buying his bay rum at the five-and-ten, he bought a nickle's worth of peppermints for the young-uns. He bought salt, soda, and some nails.

Plodding back home up the highway, he passed Aunt Fan's cabin and hailed her with due solemnity.

"Us sho got a seb'm-sister, all right," he called over the sagging wire gate, after a moment of chit-chat. "Cap'm Jim say she ain't no woods-colt. He say she black, but she got pigmies in de skin, what make her look so bright-colored. Do, my Savior! I bet she got de blue-gum! I sho ain't gwine let her chaw on my fingers like them other young-uns when she teethin'! I ain't fixin' to git pizened!"

"Praise de Lawd!" Aunt Fan answered non-committally, rocking and fanning herself on the front stoop. "Reckon what-all she gwine be up to when she old enough to be noticin'? Whoo-ee! Make my blood run cold to study 'bout it!"

Dody shivered, clutching his store-purchases as though their prosaic touch could protect him from his own thoughts. If there was any way to get rid of the baby, without violence. . . . But Cap'm Jim had said his say, and there was nothing for him to do but raise her along with the others.

It was a fearful cross to bear. For, Seven Sisters began to show signs of "the Power" at an early age. She could touch warts and they would disappear; if not at once, at least within a few weeks. She would cry,

and almost every time, a bullbat would fly out of the dusk, to go circling and screeching about the cabin's field-stone chimney.

Then there was the time when she was three, playing quietly in the cabin's shade, her dead-white skin and hair in freakish contrast with those of her black brothers and sisters. The other pickaninnies were nearby—but not too near; keeping the eye on her demanded by Clarabelle without actually playing with her.

Willie T., five, was playing train with a row of bricks tied on a string. Booger and Gaynelle, twins of eight, were fishing for jackworms—poking a blade of grass down each hole, and jerking up the tiny dragon-like insects. Lula and Willene and Buzz, aged twelve, nine, and thirteen, were engaged in a game of squat tag under the fig trees. They were not paying much attention to their queer-colored sister, though from time to time she glanced at them wistfully.

Willie T. it was who happened to look up and see the bird clumsily winging along overhead in the clear June sky. He pointed, not greatly interested.

"Look at dat ole shypoke!" Snatching up a stick, he aimed it at the flapping target, closed one eye, and shouted: *"Bang! Bang! Bah-loom!"* in imitation of Cap'm Jim's rifle. The bird flew on.

The other children glanced up idly. Only the little albino, lonesome and longing for attention, feigned an interest in this byplay. Squinting eagerly up at the distant bird, she pointed the old chicken foot with which she was playing, and trebled in mimicry of her brother: *"Bang, bang! Boom!"*

And a weird, incredible thing happened.

The shypoke, flapping along, wavered suddenly, one wing drooping. With a lurching, fluttering motion it veered—then fell like a plummet, striking the ground not three yards from where the little girl sat.

Willie T. stared. The bird was dead. There was blood on its feathers.

In a stunned, silent, wide-eyed group, Mattie's other children backed away from their ghostly sister. She blinked at them, her pinkish eyes squinting painfully in the sunlight.

"Bang-bang . . . ?" Seven Sisters repeated in a hopeful undertone.

There was a shuffle of running feet. Her lower lip quivered when she saw that she had been left alone.

She was always alone after that, partly because the other children shunned her, and partly because she could not see well enough to run after them. She had developed a peculiar squint, holding her tow-head to one side, slit-eyed, upper lip drawn back to show her oddly pointed little teeth. For a "seven-sister" she tripped over things and hurt herself twice as often as her brothers and sisters who were not gifted with supernatural powers.

Cap'm Jim, on a flying visit to the plantation one Sunday, had noticed the way the child kept always to the shadowy places.

"Weak eyes," he pronounced. "Typical of albinos. Have to get her some special glasses. . . ." He sighed, mentally adding up his vanishing bank account. "Oh, well—time enough when she starts to school. Though, Lord help the little thing at recess!"

That preference for shadow was given another connotation by dark-skinned observers.

"Dah! Ain't I done tole you?" Aunt Fan was triumphant. "See jes' like a cat in de dark, but can't see hardly nothin' in de daytime. Yessirree—she a plain-out, hard-down conjure 'oman, and I knowed hit de first time I sot eyes on her!"

By this time, the lone screech-owl which had attracted Seven Sisters's birth had become seven screech-owls, hovering in a ring around the cabin to demand Mattie's soul in return for the new baby's "Power."

This "Power" mystified Seven Sisters, though she did not doubt that she had it. Clarabelle and Dody had told her so, ever since she could understand words. Now a thin, too-quiet child of six, she accepted the fact as simply and sadly as one might accept having been born with an interesting club-foot. But, because it was the only way in which she could attract attention—half fear, half respect—the little albino drew on her imagination, and did not herself know where fact ended and fancy began.

The other children jeered at her but were frankly envious. The elders

laughed and remarked that nobody but "ig'nant country niggers" believed in conjures any more.

Secretly they came to her by night, and hissed at her window, and proffered silver in return for her magic. Seven Sisters never saw any of the money, however, as the business was always transacted through Clarabelle or Dody.

Some of the things they wanted were incomprehensible to her at first. *Mojoes*—tiny bags of cloth that might contain anything at all, plus the one thing only she possessed: "the Power." In Atlanta, in Birmingham, and Memphis, especially in Harlem, a good one might sell for as much as ten dollars. These, according to whatever words the conjurer mumbled over them, were able to perform all sorts of miracles for the wearer—from restoring the affection of a bored mate to insuring luck in the numbers game.

Seven Sisters, with the precocity of all outcasts, caught the idea early. Like the little girls who started the witch-scare in Salem, she felt pains and saw apparitions for the bug-eyed approval of kin and neighbors. She made up words and mumbled them on every occasion, squinting weirdly and impressively. She hummed tuneless little chants, in the eerie rhythm of all darkies. She memorized the better-known household "conjures"; such as, burying three hairs from the end of a hound's tail under the front steps to keep him from straying. With a ready wit she invented new ones, then forgot them and supplied others on call.

True, most of these tricks had, at one time or another, been subtly suggested by Aunt Fan or Clarabelle as the proper procedure for a "seven-sister." But the little albino, pleased and excited by any substitute for affection, threw herself into the part—a pale wistful Shirley Temple in the role of Cybele.

She wanted to be admired, however. She did not want to be feared.

But even Clarabelle, who loved her in a skittish way one might grow to love a pet snake, gave her a wide berth after the incident of the stomach-ache.

It happened one sultry August day when Dody came stumbling into the cabin, drunker than usual and in a nasty mood.

"Whah dat low-down triflin' Seb'm-Sister?" he bellowed. "Whah

she at? I gwine wear de hide off'n her back—takin' dat four-bit piece from Ole Man Wilson for a huntin' mojo! Hidin' it fum her po' ole pappy what feed her! Whah she at? . . . Young-un, you come out fum under dat table! I sees you!''

The other children, gnawing pork chop bones beside the fireplace—thanks to the sale of a ''health mojo'' purported to contain the infallible John the Conqueror root—stirred uneasily. In this mood Dody was apt to throw things at anyone within range. But it appeared that Seven Sisters, quaking under the table, was the main object of his wrath tonight.

''Come on out, you heah me?'' Dody snarled, grabbing up a stick of lightwood from the hearth and advancing toward the culprit. ''I'm gwine whup you good! Stealin' my four-bits. . . .''

''I . . . done lost it, Pappy. . . .'' Seven Sisters's childish treble was drowned out by his bellow of rage. ''Don't whup me! I drapped it in de field. I couldn't see whereat I drapped it—I'll go git it. . . .''

''Now you's lyin' to me!'' Dody roared, waving his club. ''Come on out! I'll learn you. . . .''

The other pickaninnies, fascinated, stopped gnawing their chop bones for an instant to watch, their greasy black faces gleaming in the firelight. Dody jerked the table aside. Seven Sisters cringed. Then:

''Don't you hit me wid no stick!'' the frightened child shrilled. ''I'll put a hoodoo on you! I'll. . . .''

Dody lunged, and fell over the table. His stick whistled dangerously close to the child's tow-head.

The next moment Dody was groaning with pain, doubled over, hugging his stomach. Sweat stood out on his black face. He stared at his weirdly white daughter: backed away, thick lips trembling. Seven Sisters made a dive through the open door and out into the friendly night.

Cap'm Jim happened to be at the Place that day; it was a Sunday. He rushed Dody to the nearest city in his car. Appendicitis, Cap'm Jim called it, to the man at the hospital. He and Miss Ruth had a good laugh over Dody's version of the attack.

But after that, Clarabelle stopped giving her little albino sister a

playful spank when she was naughty. No one would touch her, even in fun.

"I done tole you!" Aunt Fan intoned. "Do, Moses! Puttin' a hoodoo on she own pappy! Dat ole Seb'm-Sister, she jes' born to trouble! She *bad!*"

For more than a week thereafter, Seven Sisters hid in the woods, creeping out only to sneak food from the kitchen. She was deeply frightened. So frightened that when Cap'm Jim came to bring Dody back from the hospital, she ran from him like a wild creature. If she had not tripped over a log and knocked the breath from her slight body, he would never have caught her.

Dr. Saunders helped her up and held her gently by the shoulders, marveling anew at her Negroid features and cotton-white hair and skin. Her single garment, a faded dress which had not been changed for eight days, hung half-off one shoulder, torn and filthy. She was trembling all over, squinting up at him with white-lashed pinkish eyes dilated by terror.

"Now, now, child," the tall bossman was saying, in a tone as gentle as the grip of his hands. "What have those fools been telling you? That it's your fault about Dody's appendix? Well, Heaven help us!" He threw back his head, laughing, but stopped when he saw how it frightened his small captive. "Why, don't be scared. Cap'm Jim won't hurt you. Look here—I've got a present for you! Don't let the other young-uns get hold of it, you hear? Just hide it and play with it all by yourself, because it's yours."

The little albino stopped trembling. Gingerly she took the proffered box and gaped at the treasure inside. A doll-baby a foot high! With real hair, red hair, and eyes that opened and shut. When she turned it over, it gave a thin cry: *"Ma-ma!"* Seven Sisters giggled.

The Cap'm chuckled. "Oh, I don't reckon you want this old doll-baby," he made a pretense of taking it back, eyes twinkling. The child clutched at it. "You do? Well, then, what do you say?"

Seven Sisters ducked her head shyly. "I don' care," she whispered—polite rural South for "Thank you!"

Dr. Saunders chuckled again. "That's a good girl." He stood up; gave her a careless pat. Then he strode off toward the Place, frowning over his own problems—not the least of which was mother-in-law trouble.

He and Ruth and their two boys had been so happy in their touch-and-go way. Then his wife's mother, a forthright lady from Oklahoma, had descended upon them and decided to run their lives with a new efficiency. With her customary dispatch she had found a buyer for the old Saunders plantation, and was now raging at her slipshod son's reluctance to sell.

Even Cap'm Jim had to admit that the price was half again as much as the property was worth. Besides, his practice in Chattanooga had been dwindling of late. A mother-in-law could point out such matters so vividly . . . !

Seven Sisters blinked after his retreating back. Keeping to the shade of the pine coppice, she followed the tall white man a little way, the doll squeezed tightly against her soiled blue-gingham dress. Cap'm Jim waved at someone, who met him in the orchard—a pretty redheaded woman. They went on to the house together, arms about each other's waists. Seven Sisters watched them until they were out of sight.

Thereafter she listened attentively whenever Dody or Clary spoke of Cap'm. She grew to love anyone that he loved, and to hate anyone that he hated, with a dog-like loyalty. In her child's mind, Good became personified as Dr. Saunders, and Evil as the sheriff or Old Miz Beecher.

It was common knowledge about the mother-in-law trouble. Clarabelle, who cooked all year round for the Saunderses now, had passed along every word of the quarrel.

"Us'll git turnt out like white-trash if'n de Cap'm sell de Place," Dody mourned. "Dat old Miz Beecher! Do, Lawd! Dat old 'oman mean as a cottonmouth! She don' care what happen to us niggers, nor nobody. Miss Ruth sho don't take after her none. I wisht she'd fall down de steps and bus' her brains out, so she wouldn't plague de Cap'm no more! If'n he don' sell come Thursday, Thanksgivin', she gwine jes' make his life mis'able!"

Seven Sisters listened, huddled apart from her black kin in a shadowy corner of the cabin. Her little heart began to beat rapidly as a mad idea crept into her tow-head. Without a sound, she slipped out into the frosty night of mid-November.

There was a thing Aunt Fan had hinted to her one day—or rather, to Clarabelle within her hearing, since no one ever spoke directly to a seven-sister in idle conversation. Something about a . . . a *graven image.* There was even, Aunt Fan said, a passage about it in the Good Book, warning all Christians to steer clear of the matter.

But Seven Sisters was not a Christian. She had never been baptized in the creek like the rest of Dody's brood. Nothing hindered the plan. And . . . it sounded remarkably simple.

". . . whatever you does to de image, you does to de one you names it!" Aunt Fan's solemn words came back to her clearly. "Jes' wrop somep'm around it what dey wears next to dey skin—don't make no never-mind what hit is. And dat's de conjure! Eh, Lawd, I seed a conjure man do dat when I was married up wid my first husband. And de 'oman he conjure drap daid as a doornail dat same winter. . . . And dey do say as how hit were a big black cat got in de room whah dey was settin' up wid de corp. Hit jump up on de bed and go to yowlin' like ole Satan hisself! Yessirree, dat's de Lawd's truth like I'm tellin' you!"

Seven Sisters, picking her way easily through the dark, slipped into the pine coppice. After a moment, heart pounding, she dug up something from under a pile of leaves. A faint sound issued from it, causing her to start violently—"*Mama!*"

Like a small white ghost, the child then ran through the peach orchard. The Place, dark now since Cap'm Jim had gone back to Chattanooga, loomed just ahead. Seven Sisters found what she was looking for, under the steps of the isolated kitchen—an old piece of silk nightgown that she had seen Miss Ruth's mother herself give Clarabelle as a polishing rag for the flat silver. The older girl had used it and flung it under the kitchen steps. Seven Sisters retrieved it now furtively, and padded swiftly back through the orchard.

Deep in the pine coppice, illumined only by the filtered light of a quarter moon, she sat down cross-legged. For a long time she stared at

the lovely thing Cap'm Jim had given her, the only thing that had ever been truly her own. The hair was so soft, the glass eyes so friendly. But now the doll had taken on a new personality, a hated one. Seven Sisters glared at it, shivering a little.

Then, deftly, she tied the silk rag about its china neck, and stood up.

"Ole Miz Beecher—you's ole Miz Beecher!" she hissed with careful emphasis; then clarified, against all mistake, to whatever dark pointed ears might be listening: "Miss Ruth's mama. Cap'm Jim's wife's mama. Dat's who you is, doll; you heah me? Ole Miz Beecher . . . !"

With a fierce motion she banged the poppet hard against a tree trunk. The china head broke off and rolled at her bare feet.

"*Mama!*" wailed the headless body, accusingly.

Seven Sisters dropped it as though it were red-hot. She backed away, rubbing her hands on her dress like an infant Lady Macbeth, and shuddering in the Indian summer chill. Panting, shaken, she turned and ran back to the cabin.

But she paused in the half-open door.

Excited activity was going on inside. Aunt Fan was there, puffing with importance and fumbling for her box of snuff. Dody was shouting questions, wringing his big hands. Clarabelle, Ressie, and the others were milling about like a flock of chickens, clucking and squawking in chorus.

". . . and de phome call say for you to clean up de fambly plot on de south hill," Aunt Fan made herself heard shrilly. "She gwine be buried fum de Place like Miss Addie. . . ."

"Oh, Lawsy! Ain't it awful?" This from Ressie.

"Sho is, honey," Aunt Fan agreed complacently. "I don't reckon the Cap'm'll ever be de same, hit was so awful. I don't reckon he care what become of de Place, nor nothin', he so cut up about hit."

"Lawd he'p us!" Dody shouted for a fifth time. "When it happen? How come?"

"I done tole you," Aunt Fan repeated, relishing the drama of her words. "Truck run slap into 'em. She was plumb flang out'n de car. Cap'm want even scratched up. But it broke her pore neck. . . ."

The child in the doorway caught her breath sharply. The conjure had worked! So soon? A little knot of nausea gathered in her stomach, in memory of the china head rolling against her bare foot. Then an angry thought came.

"Aunt Fan— Cap'm ain't gwine bury that old 'oman in de fambly plot, is he?" Seven Sisters piped above the chatter. "Not dat ole Miz Beecher . . . !"

The excited group barely glanced at her, impatient of the interruption.

"Miz Beecher?" Aunt Fan grunted. "Lawd, chile, hit ain't ole Miz Beecher what got killt. Hit was Miss Ruth. . . ." The aged Negress went on with her narrative, dwelling on the details with relish. "And de man tole Marse Joe Andrews over de phome. . . . Eh, Lawd; he say de Cap'm jes' set dah by she bed and hold she hand. Don't cry nor nothin'. Jes' set dah and stare, like he daid, too. . . ."

Seven Sisters heard no more. A sound like falling timber roared in her ears. Through it, dimly, she thought she heard a screech-owl's quavering cry—eerie, mocking, malicious.

She turned and ran. Ran, blindly sobbing. Cap'm Jim's Miss Ruth! She had forgotten Miss Ruth's hair was red, exactly like the doll's. And . . . that soiled bit of nightgown might not have been ole Miz Beecher's at all, but Miss Ruth's. Cap'm Jim's Miss Ruth. . . .

Beyond the cornfield the black woods opened up to receive the small ghostly figure, running like an animal in pain; running nowhere, anywhere, into the chill autumn night.

Sawbriars tore dark scratches in her dead-white skin, but Seven Sisters did not feel them. She ran, careening into tree trunks and fighting through scuppernong vines, until the salt taste of blood came into her mouth. Twice she fell and lay in the damp leaves for a long time, her thin shoulders racked with sobs.

"Oh, Cap'm! Cap'm Jim . . . I . . . I didn't go to do it!" she whimpered aloud once. "I didn't mean to! I didn'—hones' I didn'. . . ."

At that moment she heard the dogs baying.

Tense as a fox, she sat up and listened. Was it only Old Man Wilson,

hunting with his pack along the north ridge? Or was it . . . the Law? A posse, with guns, following the deputy sheriff and his two flop-eared bloodhounds through the canebrake. Following a trail of small bare feet. *Her* feet. . . .

The little albino sprang up, her flat darkey features contorted with panic. Harrowing yarns crowded her memory. Of the time Aunt Fan's preacher husband had hid in the canebrake for eight days, with the dogs baying closer and closer. And Aunt Fan's husband had only cut a man with his razor, while *she*. . . .

Just then she heard the screech-owl, right over her head.

Seven Sisters was running again, goaded now by the spurs of terror. But now the very woods seemed hostile. Gnarled branches snatched at her cottony hair and tore a jagged flap in her gingham dress. Old spider webs clung to her face. The dogs sounded nearer. Once more she tripped and fell, panting, but sprang up again with a scream as something slithered out from beneath her arm.

The screech-owl tittered again, from somewhere above her. It seemed to be trailing the ghostly little fugitive, so white against the ground.

Seven Sisters ran on, blindly, staggering with exhaustion. Once she cried out in her terror—oddly, the very name of the one she was running from:

"*Cap'm . . . ! Cap'm Jim. . . .*"

Of a sudden the ground dropped from beneath her feet. She pitched forward, and felt herself falling into space. Dark icy water rushed up out of nowhere to meet and engulf her. . . .

Mist rose from the cornfield in front of Dody's cabin. Dry leaves rattled. The gourds of the martin pole swung in the wind.

Somewhere a screech-owl quavered again, far away, in the direction of the creek—whose muddy waters had washed away the sins of many a baptized little darkey.

PARASITE MANSION

There was nothing about the aspect of that little stretch of Alabama road to warn the girl of disaster. Driving along at a careful forty, the wheels of her battered roadster sunk in deep clay ruts, Marcia Trent had no premonition of evil lurking in that pine coppice just ahead. She was young, modern, redheaded, and furiously angry. Her blue eyes snapped as she drove, alone, through Blue Ridge foothills that shivered under the first touch of winter.

The realization that this mad dash was foolish and dangerous—four hundred miles to Birmingham, when everyone believed she was safe at a girls' school in Carolina—pricked at her conscience now and then; but she thrust it aside angrily. The last train and the last bus had gone when, blinking the tears from her eyes, locked in her dormitory room, she had made up her mind.

And now—the blue eyes flashed—she was two-thirds of the way home . . . to break up her sister's marriage to a man whose engagement solitaire winked up at her from her own left hand!

Marcia compressed her lips and shifted gears, plowing through mud as she rounded a sharp curve.

At that moment something like an angry hornet struck through the

windshield of the roadster. It smacked into the leather seat a scant two inches from her shoulder, and a rayed hole glittered in the glass.

The girl screamed, ducked. This time, clearly, she had heard a muffled shot—the crack of a rifle. And that second hole in her windshield was no accident.

Someone was sniping at her from that dark coppice to the left!

Marcia slid low in the car seat, peering over the dashboard and gripping the wheel. Terror was like a hand clutching her throat. She stepped hard on the gas, and skidded around the curve.

And abruptly there was no road stretching before her eyeline. Space yawned as the car skidded and plunged downward. With a crash it slid sidewise over a low embankment. Marcia clawed at the door, tried to jump clear, but pain wrenched at her ankle. Then something hard and solid struck her head, and darkness fell like a black velvet curtain.

She fought to retain consciousness. Distorted visions swam before her eyes. Once a dirty bearded face bent over her, and she gasped at the stench of stale corn liquor. Voices drifted to her ears, faint and disjointed:

A man's voice, gruff and slurred with drink: "You little fool! . . . not to touch that rifle again . . . take us *all* away if you've—"

And a child's voice, frightened and defiant: "I don't care! I don't care! They'll never take Lollie away to that place—I'll kill them! . . . kill everybody who comes here—"

And the man's voice again: ". . . your fault if they do! . . . not dead, just a slight concussion. Oh, hell! Nothing we can do but—"

The car door was jerked open. Weakness and nausea overwhelmed the girl as a dirty hand reached in, tugged at her, lifted her out. Marcia half opened her eyes once, aware of being carried like a baby in strong arms. A chill drizzle of rain wet her face, and the muffled *squish-squosh* of heavy boots in mud kept time with the swaying of the arms that cradled her. She tried to cry out, to squirm from their grasp. But the black curtain fell once more, and the faint sobbing of a child trailed her into oblivion.

When she opened her eyes again, Marcia thought she must be going mad.

There was no wrecked car, no bleak red-clay hills, no dark pine coppice hugging a lonely mountain road. She lay, warm and quiet, in a huge four-poster bed, in a high-ceiled Colonial-type room that would have delighted the heart of an antique dealer. A lighted oil lamp, held close above her, knifed at her aching head; and she blinked painfully, trying to see just beyond its radiance.

And then, swiftly, she shut her eyes, trying not to see.

Three faces were bending over her: a small tow-headed boy's—tear-stained, sensitive, and violent; a man's face—bearded, lined by suffering, with somber eyes that held no friendliness. But the third face, Marcia thought wildly, could only be that of a mummy. That wrinkled mask with its hook nose, wispy gray hair, and bright shoe-button eyes leered down at her intently. A claw-like hand poked at her hair.

"Pretty! Ay, she's pretty! Eh? Eh, Victor?" a thin voice quavered, taunting with its acid humor. "That why you didn't leave her to die in the car? Eh? Answer me, Victor! Because you're lonesome and sick of hiding out here. Eh? And what happens when you're done with her? You can't send her back."

Marcia shut her eyes tight. She lay stiff and still, praying that her lids would not quiver.

"Don't be a fool, Gran," the man's voice lashed out, thick with drunkenness. "Renny shot at her, made her crack up her car. The Mason family," his tone was bitter, "owes her something for that. Besides," he added callously, "there are bullet holes in the upholstery. If someone noticed them when they found her, they'd be sure to come snooping around here. . . . Oh, damn you, Renny!" he burst out wearily. "Why did you do a crazy thing like that? I told you not to touch that rifle."

"But, Vic, sh-she was slowing down!" the boy's voice whimpered. "They sent her here to get Lollie! I know they did! She can't take her . . . I'll kill her! I'll kill her!" the voice rose to a screech of hysteria.

And Marcia's eyes flew open in terror as two strong little hands fastened about her throat.

Feebly she fought them off, staring up into the white contorted face of the boy. He could not have been over eleven or twelve years old—but for a second time he was trying to kill her!

The bearded man moved swiftly, however. He seized the boy by the hair, shoved him toward the door with gentle force. Sobbing, screaming, the child ran out of the room. Marcia could hear his bare feet running down a long flight of stairs, followed by the distant slam of a door.

There was nothing for it now but to look up at the other two faces, with what false courage she could muster.

"Where . . . where am I?" Marcia forced a stiff smile and sat up. Instantly she fell back as pain knifed at her ankle. "Ooh . . . it's broken!"

The bearded man looked down at her, with no sympathy in his somber eyes. "No," he said crisply. "Just a bad sprain. I strapped it up, and also took a few stitches in your scalp."

Marcia blinked at him. "*You* . . . took—?"

Her head was clearing now. The shabby splendor of the room amazed her, dulled, even though it was, by dust and cobwebs. The bed in which she lay was beautifully made and very old, with pineapple knobs on the posts; but the frayed quilt that covered her was its only bedding. The period furniture was priceless. But rain blew unchecked through a broken pane of the window, drenching an old carved highboy across the room. A rusty blind creaked in the wind and banged against the house. The old place was like a beggar-king, arrogant still in silken rags and a tarnished crown.

The man who stood looking down at her, Marcia thought, was an even greater contradiction. Dirty, half-drunk, bearded and unkempt, he yet had the voice and manner of a gentleman. And his hands, washed clean now, were graceful and quick—hands that, he had informed her, had strapped up her sprain and skillfully taken stitches in a scalp cut.

"You're . . . a doctor, then?" Marcia faltered.

The man gave a short laugh. Beside him, the old crone emitted a high squeal of mirth and squinted up at him, head to one side like an evil bird.

"Doctor! Heh-heh! Are you a doctor, she says, Victor!" One button-eye winked at Marcia, and a scrawny thumb jerked at the man.

"Him, a doctor? Not any more, dearie! He's not fit to tend a sick horse—him with his drinkin' and hidin' out here in the hills like a murderer, because o' the black fear that's in him!"

"Shut up, Gran," the man snapped in a tired voice.

Something like a shadow had crept into his deep-set eyes at the old woman's words. He glared at her briefly, twisting together hands that had begun to tremble. Then he glowered down at Marcia, eyes cold and unfriendly.

"Listen to me," he rapped out. "Those bullets fired into your car were accidental, but I don't expect you to believe that. A . . . a sick child. My little brother, Renfield. He . . . wasn't responsible, but of course it was outrageous. However, the facts are these: I could have left you there with a slight concussion and a sprained ankle. You were off the highway detour, you know. Cars don't take our road once a week; so you'd have had a long crawl to the next farm. As it is, I carried you here and gave you medical attention, free of charge."

He paused, scowling down at Marcia, at her scared blue eyes turned up to him. A slight quiver in her lower lip must have caught his attention, for the harsh voice softened.

"I'm sorry. You're frightened, of course. Don't be; you're quite safe here. I can get your car in running order, and you can be on your way early tomorrow morning. Tonight you'll have to accept—" his mouth twisted again— "such hospitality as we can offer. Tomorrow . . . I'm requesting only that you leave without asking questions about . . . anything you may see or hear in this house. Forget us as though we never existed. Isn't that fair enough?"

"Y-yes. Oh, yes. Anything you say." Marcia nodded terrified agreement. Of course the man was merely trying to fool her, to calm her fears until. . . . She bit her lip, determined not to cry with those two hostile faces glaring down at her. "Thank you for . . . helping me," she said brightly. "I'm sure the shooting was . . . accidental. And you've been kind, and I won't say a thing! All I w-want is to get on to Birmingham before they m-miss me at home and at the school I l-left."

The man called Victor, towering over her, gave a grunt of disdain.

"College girl, eh?" he snorted. "What are you doing, driving across country alone—Carolina to Alabama, judging by your license plate?"

Marcia set her teeth with an effort. "Not a college girl," she said with dignity. "I'm twenty-six—an assistant professor of Abnormal Psychology. I . . . I'm studying to be a psychiatrist."

The man laughed aloud, and rubbed his bearded chin.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said bluntly. "A dumb little fluff like you? Now I've seen everything!" The dark eyes narrowed as he spoke. They flicked a glance at the old crone, grinning beside him, then bored into Marcia. "All right," he snapped. "So you're a student-professor of psychiatry. Well . . . let me warn you, don't go practicing any of your damned scientific rot around here! . . . Science!" Once more that shadow came into his haunted, deep-set eyes, and his mouth twitched. "Logic! It's fine, it's perfect until we come up against a blank wall. Then all we can do is pretend it's not there. Fantasy! Superstition! Science has hidden behind those words too often, when something that can't be explained—"

He broke off short, aware of the girl's intent gaze on his face. Once more his eyes went cold, menacing, and a long forefinger jabbed out.

"Just mind your own business while you are here," he warned, "and nothing will happen to you. Stay in this room; don't go prowling—not that you can do very much on that ankle. And if you hear or see things that don't make sense . . . forget 'em! Is that clear?"

With a caught breath, Marcia nodded rapidly. The man grunted, then strode toward the door. On the threshold he paused to scowl back at the old woman.

"Gran," he called harshly, "none of your idle chatter, you hear? Or I'll break your scrawny neck!"

The aged mummy flapped a hand at him, cackling nasally and winking one bird-like eye at Marcia. "Go on with ye, Victor! Out! Go get ye another jug of corn, and come home sotty drunk as usual! Heh-heh! I'd not be tellin' a stranger the Mason family secret, would I? Would I now?"

The man cursed audibly and stalked out, slamming the door hard.

Marcia relaxed with a sigh of relief. For now, perhaps, she could bribe this senile old woman to let her go before. . . . Her eyes strayed to a window, its broken pane stuffed with yellowed newspaper. It was almost dusk. The sky was a dirty smear of clouds, as though a witch had swept it with her sooty broom. Rain slanted against the panes with a faint hiss of sleet. The wind had risen, whining under the eaves like a leprous beggar. Out there, the girl saw with a sinking heart, it would be a long, cold hobble on her sprained ankle to the next farm.

But here—in this eerie old house, with a bearded derelict, a grinning mummy, and a murderous child—she most assuredly must not wait for night to fall. Gathering her courage, she turned a bright smile on the old hag.

"Look here," her voice was confidential and persuasive, "there's fifty dollars in my purse, in the glove compartment of my wrecked car. If you'll help me get away from here before he . . . he comes back, you can have it."

"Have it? Heh-heh! I got it a'ready!" old Gran cackled with evil mirth. "Renny fetched it to me whilst Victor was fussin' over your hurt. A good boy, that Renny," she crooned. Then the beady eyes narrowed. "If you tell Victor, I'll put the lad onto ye again! He'll do for ye this time, sure enough. Quick and strong, Renny is—if a bad shot. Now, if I was to give him a knife, let's say—"

She squinted at the girl slyly, rubbing bony hands together. But Marcia sat up in bed, oddly steadied rather than frightened by the heavy tone of threat.

"I don't think he wants to hurt me," she said calmly, "except in defense of this . . . Lollie. His sister? I'm beginning to understand a little of this crazy business. Someone has threatened to come and take her away; is that it? Her brother shot at me, thinking I was from . . . the police? No, hardly. Or the county hospital, perhaps? Is Lollie tubercular or something?"

The old crone burst out in another shriek of mirth at that. For a full minute she rocked with nasal laughter, flapping thin arms. Then, without a word, she scuttled from the room, leaving the door ajar on a wide dusty hall.

Marcia, frowning after her, marveled anew at the unkept splendor of

the old house, once undoubtedly the pride of an old Southern family. Places like this, she knew, were not uncommon in the Deep South. Impoverished during Reconstruction days, many a family of decadent aristocrats still lived on in old homes like this one. Stubbornly they clung to the furnishings and traditions of a bygone era, though poverty had worked its will on the people themselves. Hope and ambition dried up at the spring. Only the stolid will to live kept them alive, bitter and weary and uncaring, in a decaying old mansion that had once rung with music and laughter and the voices of Negro slaves.

But . . . Marcia shook her head. These people, she mused, were not the quitting kind. There was fire and fight in the eyes of that boy Renny, and a savage defiance behind the haunted look of Victor Mason. Poverty and lack of ambition, she felt, were not the cause of their disintegration. Gingerly her hand went to her bandaged scalp, and felt of the strapped ankle. Skilled hands had done that work, not those of a drunken idler. Something else had weakened the spines of these Masons. Some shadow, nameless and forbidding, hung over this old house into which fate had dumped her on a rainy afternoon. "The Mason family secret," the old hag had called mockingly as Victor went out. What secret?

Quite clearly Marcia knew all at once that Victor Mason, ex-doctor, was horribly afraid of something, as was his nervous, violent little brother Renny. Fear like an obscene fungus sprouted from the very walls of this old house. Marcia shivered, hunched down in the huge bed—and her imagination groped with a trembling hand through darkness for what the answer might be. . . .

A slight sound made her glance up, heart pounding.

The half-open door was swinging slowly wider. Marcia stopped breathing. And then her breath came out in a *whoosh* of relief.

A young girl of perhaps sixteen stood in the doorway. Barefoot, dirty, her frail body clad only in a sleeveless one-piece dress of cheap cotton, there was yet an exquisite faery quality about her that made Marcia's heart turn over. Uncombed blonde hair fell shoulder-length, framing a thin sensitive face with the dreamy startled eyes of a fawn. Tensed, like a wild thing poised for flight, the girl took a step into the

room—and another, and another until she stood a few feet from the bed. She stared at Marcia, lips parted in child-like wonder, hands clasped at her breast.

"Oh, you're pretty!" Her voice was a timid whisper. "You didn't really come to take me away. Did you? And let them lock me up?"

Marcia stared back at her, caught by the girl's delicate beauty. "No, dear," she murmured gently. "Of course not. You're Lollie, aren't you? Renny's sister, and Victor's? Come closer; I won't hurt you. Why should anyone want to hurt you?"

The fawn-eyes flickered toward the door warily, and came back to Marcia, round and trusting. One finger stole out suddenly, timidly, indicating a brilliant brooch at Marcia's throat.

"What's that?" she asked with wonder. "Precious jewels! Are you a princess, like in the picture book?" The soft eyes regarded Marcia with admiration. "You *are* a princess, in disguise! I can tell! And you wouldn't take me away to that place," she asserted with a quick smile of trust. "Renny said you were a mean lady. But he's wrong. You're like the princess in the story— 'both beautiful and kind,' it said. I can tell," the blonde head nodded solemnly. "I can tell by your eyes and the way you talk. . . . Oh, the pretty jewels!" she clapped her hands. "Red and blue and green and yellow, like a rainbow!"

Marcia bit her lip, blinking back tears of pity for this lovely young girl with the mind of a child. On impulse, her hands went swiftly to the brooch at her neck, and unfastened it. She did not hold it out; merely laid it on the edge of the bare mattress.

"There, dear," she whispered. "You like it? You can have it. But don't tell anybody—it's our secret!"

The fawn-eyes widened with delight. "Ooh! For me? Now I'm sure you're a princess! Only a really, truly princess would . . . it's mine? To keep?"

One delicate hand stole out toward the ornament; almost touched it. And then an incredible thing happened.

Like a live creature, the brooch leaped suddenly into the air some three feet above the bed. It poised there for a fractional moment, then sailed across the room to crash against the far wall.

The girl Lollie emitted a sharp wail of pain. She jerked back her arm, and then cringed, gripping her right wrist. Marcia stared, stunned.

She herself had not moved. There was no other living creature in the shadowy room. And the nails of the girl's own left hand were broken or bitten off to the quick.

But, nevertheless, four deep scratches were slowly reddening in angry welts on Lollie's forearm. As Marcia looked, blood oozed from them. It ran down the slender wrist and dripped to the dusty carpet.

Lollie stifled a sob. One piteous glance she cast at Marcia. Her lips moved as though she were trying to speak, to explain, but no sounds issued from them. Another sob wracked her frail body. Then, with a longing look at the brooch, gleaming where it had fallen in the distant corner, she wheeled and ran from the room.

Marcia huddled in the big bed, wide-eyed and still. Her stunned gaze was fastened on the empty doorway through which the girl had vanished . . . and caught a glimpse of straggly gray hair. Old Gran was peering at her around the jamb. Now, discovered, she popped out, breaking into another of her senile cachinnations and flapping bony hands against her thighs.

"Heh-heh-heh! Scared out'n a year's growth, ain't ye? They all are, them that's ever seen it!"

She scuttled over to the corner, pounced on the brooch, and held it to catch the fading light, beady eyes glittering brighter than the jeweled ornament. It looked grotesque in that wrinkled mummy-hand.

"My, ain't that fancy! Too fancy for a child—and a crazed one, at that!" she tittered, thrusting the brooch into a pocket of her gray shawl. "And ye'll not tell Victor about this, either!" she added, glaring. "Ye hear? If ye do, he'll beat Lollie for comin' up here to see ye when he told her not. Ye wouldn't want to cause her hurt, now would ye, dearie? Besides, if Vic knows ye saw her, he might not let ye leave here . . . so ye won't be tellin' him, will ye, dearie?" she asked slyly.

Marcia gulped, and shook her head like one dazed by a blow. The weird events of the past few minutes had bewildered her. But rapidly

her logic and common sense were coming to the rescue, thrusting out in every direction for a spark of sanity in this mad household.

She glanced down at the ring on her finger, and her lip quivered uncontrollably. Jim, her Jim, and Alice were marching up the church aisle about now, to the strains of *Lohengrin.* And back at the school, no one would miss her until Monday classes. Here in this old house in the mountains she could be swallowed up, and no one would ever know what had become of her and her battered little roadster. Perhaps, before Lollie's visit, she had had a chance to escape alive. But now, apparently, she had seen too much. When Victor Mason came home! Someone would tell him; he would know. . . .

Miserably she sought for a possible means of escape. Why would they want to keep her here? To insure her silence, of course—silence about some secret this old house held. Those scratches on the girl's arm, the fear in all their eyes, and the antics of that jumping brooch; it all added up, she was certain, to a weird mystery that smacked of the supernatural. Something here, something no more tangible than a shadow, had changed a skilled young doctor into a drunken hermit, a healthy intelligent little boy into a nervous killer, and this fine old home into a haunted hovel. That appealing girl-child called Lollie—the mystery centered about her, Marcia was sure. And as long as it remained a mystery, for a stranger like herself to chatter about when she left, she would never get out of this old house alive.

She sat up in bed, blue eyes snapping with sudden purpose.

Here before her was a riddle—which, solved, might mean her freedom. And no young woman who dared study the science of psychiatry could look herself in the face again if she felt too terrified even to attempt its solution!

Marcia looked at Gran. The old hag was squinting at her again; she had just spied the diamond solitaire, and was staring at it greedily.

"I want that, too!" she rasped, jabbing out a bony finger at the ring. "Give it to me, quick—or ye'll not leave this house alive. I'll set Renny onto ye! I'll give him a knife."

Marcia tensed. All her senses were alert now, wrestling with her

problem. There was also a burning desire to help that dryad of a girl, Lollie—and a barb of curiosity—to stiffen her spine and sharpen her wits.

Now, obediently, she tugged at the ring to pacify this absurd old woman. "I can't get it off," she lied. "You'll have to get me soap and water, or a file. Tell me about Lollie, won't you . . . er . . . Gran? Isn't that what they call you? Your grandchildren?"

The old hag spat with surprising venom. "Victor and them? Ha! Them spineless Masons! A pack of fools, the lot of 'em . . . and they're no kin of mine, except by marriage. 'Twas Aubrey Mason I married, their great-uncle and the biggest fool of the lot. A smart woman could wrap him around her finger. Which I did!" she cackled. "Which I did! His fine womenfolks yelped and fumed their heads off, but he married me—right off the streets, in Mobile! Not good enough for 'em, I wasn't. And now," she tittered with shrill secret mirth, "now they're not good enough for me! They've rotted away at the root, these high-and-mighty Masons . . . and it's fear that's rotted 'em! Fear!"

She stopped short, glaring suspiciously at Marcia as though apprehensive that she had said too much. Wrinkled lips writhed back from toothless gums.

"It's no business of yours!" she snarled. "What are you questionin' me for? Get that ring off! Give it to me, quick, before—"

She broke off again, cocking her head sidewise in a listening attitude. Then, muttering, she scuttled from the room.

A moment later a tall saturnine man, clean-shaven and dressed in a cheap dark suit, strode in from the hall. At Marcia's expression, he smiled wryly and rubbed his chin.

"Yes, Miss . . . Trent, by your driver's license," Victor Mason drawled. "You're thinking I look almost human without the beard, eh? Thank you. First time I've dressed and shaved in six months. You should be honored!"

Marcia looked up at him, caught a gleam of sardonic humor in the dark eyes, and smiled. It was a bright, intimate smile. Many a young

male had assured her it was irresistible. But Victor Mason snorted.

"Trying feminine wiles on me now, are you?" he laughed shortly. "Hoping to cajole me into not keeping you here? Please don't bother!" he snapped coldly. "I have no intention of detaining you, Miss Trent, any longer than I can possibly help. Your car wasn't damaged much. Just a blow-out, a bent axle, and a crumpled fender. I have a man working on it now—one who'll overlook the bullet holes."

"Oh! Thank you! I—" Marcia began in a rush of relief.

"Just now, though," Mason continued coldly, "I'm worried. It's Renny. He seems determined to finish what he started, the minute he gets a chance. He's hiding somewhere around the house now. Until I find him and lock him up in the woodshed, I suppose I'll have to act as your bodyguard. Damned nuisance!"

Marcia shrugged, hiding her worried look, and continued to smile. She patted her hair, straightened her collar. If only he did not learn about Lollie's visit!

"You know," she said coolly, "I believe you're the rudest man I ever met, Doctor Mason. At first I was afraid of you. But now, since I've discovered that *you* are horribly afraid, too . . . of something . . . I'm not frightened any more. Your little brother? Neurotic. That's why he tried to shoot me, and—"

She stopped with a gasp of dismay. Victor Mason's eyes, which had drifted from her face, were suddenly riveted on the dusty carpet. Two bright drops of blood glistened there. The man's head jerked up, eyes narrowed, glowering at Marcia.

"Lollie!" he burst out. "She's been in here, hasn't she? The little idiot, I warned her! I'll—"

"You'll beat her?" Marcia flashed, indignant. "You'd punish that poor sick child?"

The man frowned. "Beat Lollie? Whatever gave you that idea? I'd break anybody in half," he grated, "who tried to lay a hand on her! I wouldn't hesitate to . . . kill you in cold blood, Miss Trent, if I thought you were going to make her unhappy, intentionally or otherwise." He shrugged, laughed wearily. "There, you see? I love my sister quite as

much as Renny. I've devoted my life to helping her—but I've failed miserably. There's nothing a man, a blundering scientist, can do . . . against—''

He broke off, that shadow of horror darkening the deep-set eyes. His mouth twitched, and the graceful surgeon's-hands twisted together in anguish. Abruptly he whirled on Marcia.

''What did you see?'' he rasped. ''How much do you know? Damn you! I knew if I brought you here. . . . Now,'' he stated flatly, ''you can never be permitted to leave. That's that. Your promise of silence isn't enough. You'd break it—and I can't take that chance for Lollie.''

Marcia nodded gently. ''I understand,'' she said. ''If her case were reported to the authorities, the child would be committed to . . . an institution for the insane. I've read of such cases,'' she whispered, awed. ''It's . . . demoniacal possession, isn't it? When her . . . seizures recur, she's affected with. . . . Dr. Mason, I've heard of stigmata, but I never thought I'd see a case so remarkable. It occurs most often in religious fanatics, so I've read. There was a case in Bavaria only last week. The woman, upset by war news, broke out with wounds similar to those of Christ on the Cross. Medical records tell of dozens of other cases.

''There was also a little Rumanian girl who broke out with 'bites' and 'scratches' like those inflicted by a large cat. *Dermographism,* that's the medical term. And when it is accompanied by *hyperemia,* the stigmatic wounds actually bleed. Extreme hysteria causes the skin to react to imaginary blows, and cuts and weals will appear as though the victim has actually been struck.

''Your sister, Lollie . . . I saw her arm break out with such wounds that bled. The attack was accompanied by temporary *aphonia,* too—hysterical loss of speech. Oh, the poor darling! If only there were something we could do to help her!''

Victor's savage look faded. Curiously he peered at Marcia, undecided for a moment. Then, as if driven by a surge of despair, he took one stride and sat down on the edge of the great bed.

''I've misjudged you,'' he blurted. ''You are kind . . . and you also seem to be a level-headed young woman, Miss Trent. I . . . I . . .

you've studied psychiatry. Tell me, frankly, does Lollie seem to be a mental case?''

Marcia met his eye thoughtfully, and shook her head.

''No, Doctor Mason. She seems a rather bright child, though undeveloped. Too sheltered, naturally. She must be extremely nervous, to be afflicted with stigmata. But . . . no; I wouldn't say she was insane. Just badly frightened—like the rest of you! What is it you're afraid of, here in this house?''

The man's eyes darkened. His mouth twitched; he steadied it with an effort.

''We're afraid of . . . *It,*'' he said flatly. ''The . . . the Thing that scratches her. Oh, yes, Miss Trent,'' he gestured bitterly, ''talk about stigmata till you're black in the face! I've studied it. I can quote you case histories you never heard of. At least two more, anyhow,'' he muttered. ''My Aunt Silvia, and my great-aunt, Anne. You see, we Masons have lived with this Thing for three generations. It's been handed down, always affecting the youngest, most high-strung daughter. That's the hideous thing. It isn't new. It's been with us so long . . . and yet we've never been able to get to it or do a thing toward . . . destroying it.''

His voice trailed off dully. Marcia opened her mouth, shut it with a snap.

''Doctor Mason,'' she exploded, ''you're not hinting that you believe there actually is something that . . . that scratches Lollie! Of all the silly superstitious rot! Why, an intelligent medical man like yourself—''

Victor Mason snorted. ''Superstitious!'' he laughed harshly. ''That's what we've been hearing all our lives! Stigmata! Nervous hysteria! Listen, Miss Trent—it isn't only those welts on Lollie's flesh that make me believe the unbelievable. There are other phenomena. Inanimate objects move and go flying through the air, in a room where Lollie is. Small objects that a . . . a creature about the size of a monkey might pick up and throw.''

Marcia stiffened. She was remembering that flying brooch. But a recoiling spring in the mattress, logic told her, could easily have

catapulted the ornament across the room. Only her disturbed fancy had made it seem to move so slowly, to hang there in midair for a moment. For the thing could not have flown across the room by itself—nor could any ghostly hand have thrown it. The idea was ridiculous.

But a look at Victor Mason's haunted eyes sent a chill down her spine.

"I've tried so hard and so long," he was saying wearily. "I gave up my internship in a New York hospital and came home when . . . when Lollie . . . I was twenty-two then. She was nine. For seven years I've worked on her here, studied, tried everything under the sun. I . . . I've even hired a professional ghost-breaker to try and exorcise the thing. But it's no use."

"Why don't you send her to a good private sanitarium?" Marcia demanded. "I should think—" She broke off.

Victor Mason stood up with a jerk, and glared down at her. "There!" he snarled. "I knew you'd say that! They all do. Send her away, lock her up in a padded cell for observation by a lot of crackpot neurologists! Miss Trent, my great-aunt Anne died in an asylum. Aunt Silvia killed herself rather than be sent back to one. Poor little Lollie lives in terror that she'll be dragged away from us and locked up like an animal . . . for nothing! Your damned scientists can't do a thing for her; they never did anything for Anne or Silvia! Because, you see, it's not a nervous hallucination. The Thing is real."

Marcia shook her head, exasperated. "You actually believe that?"

Mason nodded. "I do. In adolescence, this . . . this demon attached itself to Anne, then to Silvia when Anne died. It got Lollie sooner because she was always a nervous child. It's like an invisible parasite! It will live, attached to her, until she dies—just as it lived with Anne and Silvia Mason.

"That case in Rumania that you mentioned: a young girl, possessed or haunted by a sort of 'familiar spirit.' They called it a *poltergeist*—a mean, prankish spirit, not really dangerous, just annoying and nerve-racking like a bad-tempered monkey. That," he intoned, "is what we Masons have been living with for three generations. We've had the

choice of believing we were either haunted or insane—with everyone we knew blandly telling us the Thing simply doesn't exist. That's made us rather anti-social," Mason drawled bitterly, "trying to live a normal life outside and a madman's existence within our home. Gradually it's sapped our strength and ambition until we're—" He gestured bitterly. "Well, you see, Miss Trent. Poor-white trash; that's what we've become. We have no friends, and . . . frankly, our only income is from the bootleg corn that I distill and sell. We've shut ourselves off from the world, with only one thought: to make Lollie's life as bearable as possible under the circumstances. So now you know," he added flatly, "why I can't take the chance of your leaving here and talking. Sensation-mongers would overrun us tomorrow if Lollie's case were made public. Then some officious busybody would insist on her being sent to the state asylum for 'medical aid' . . . and she'd kill herself, or die of sheer terror."

The ex-doctor passed a hand over his bloodshot eyes. Marcia, her heart sinking, stared at him. But the man's face was cold, determined.

"I don't know what to do. Murder," he drawled, "doesn't appeal to me. But if you attempt to leave here now, I'm afraid it's my only alternative, Miss Trent."

Marcia shivered, then steadied herself with an effort.

"I can keep my mouth shut," she said. "But I see you don't believe that. All right, Doctor Mason. My only chance then is to . . . break this ghost that's been breaking you all these years; is that it? I don't believe in goblins. I can't believe that poor child is haunted by an invisible being that scratches her and throws things. There's a scientific explanation for the stigmata; you admit that much. Well, then—there must be a reason for those objects sailing through the air.

"It sounds like the supernatural, I know. But so did television, to people of Shakespeare's time. If a parachute jumper had dropped from a plane in a twelfth-century village, he'd have been burned at the stake. But the witchcraft of today is the science of tomorrow, Doctor Mason. Look here. Will you let me be around that poor child, Lollie, tonight? I have reason to believe she likes and trusts me, and I may be able to help her. May I try? Not," she burst out sincerely, "just to get myself

out of this jam, but because I feel desperately sorry for Lollie, for all of you, and want to help you—believe it or not!"

The shadow-ridden eyes of Victor Mason bored into her face, troubled and uncertain. But Marcia's blue ones did not waver; and a half-smile twisted the bitter mouth. Mason thrust out his hand.

"You're a good sport," he sighed. "Of course, there's nothing you can do. I . . . wish I dared trust your silence. But Renny and I live for Lollie, you understand. We can't let any other emotion conflict with our efforts to help her."

Marcia nodded. "I understand. But you'll send her to me, so I can—?"

The former doctor frowned thoughtfully. Then, on sudden impulse, he flipped back the quilt and lowered Marcia's feet to the floor.

"I'll do better than that," he shrugged. "You're going to be here from now on, so you might as well get a quick dose of what it's like. Dinner was nearly ready when I came up. I planned to send you up a tray, but . . . well, with Renny on the loose, you'd better eat with us. Think you can hobble downstairs?"

Leaning on the man's proffered arm, Marcia stood up painfully. "I think I can make it," she grimaced. "But—maybe your grandmother—or great-aunt, I believe she said—maybe she won't like my dining with the family. I don't think," she added carefully, "that she likes me very much."

"Who, Gran?" Mason laughed, and shrugged. "Oh, Gran doesn't like anybody. She's the black sheep of our family. Married a weak-willed ancestor of ours, after a rather lurid past, and the family never received her. She's lived in the house here, though, hating us like hell because marrying Great-uncle Aubrey didn't automatically make her a lady! But . . . she's watched us deteriorate, and likes to rub it in. Gran's the only one of us, I suppose, who hasn't let this business get her down. She just calls a ghost a ghost, and lets it go at that!"

"I see," Marcia murmured. "Yes, she's quite a character!"

She glanced up at the weary, sardonic profile beside her. Leaning on Mason's arm, she managed to limp down a long, curved staircase, deep in dust and cobwebs like every other part of the big house. Down a

long hall they went, and across a rotting screened porch to the isolated kitchen in the rear.

"We live in the kitchen and keep the rest of the house closed," her host explained as he shoved open the door.

Marcia hobbled in. The kitchen was huge, cluttered but fairly clean. On the side opposite a big wood stove, an unpainted table was set—for five. Then Marcia thought, the old woman had expected her after all.

But, as they entered now, Gran turned from the stove and peered at her in surprise. She leered at Mason.

"Well, Victor!" she quavered. "Have ye lost your mind? Want her to see everything, eh? Want her to blabber about Lollie all over the state? Eh? Eh?"

Victor Mason dismissed her with a look. "She's not leaving," he snapped. "Miss Trent is staying with us . . . indefinitely; and I suspect you, Gran, of sending Lollie up there to see her. Set another plate—the damage is done, and she'll just have to stay."

He helped Marcia into a straight-backed kitchen chair, on his right at the head of the table. A dingy frayed cloth that had once been fine damask covered the unpainted boards. The dishes, Marcia noted, were a strange mixture of exquisite china and ten-cent-store crockery. The knives and forks were of cheap steel, but the spoons—of thin silver, with an "M" monogram—hinted of the lost splendor of a bygone era.

Now, in spite of that fifth place already laid, the old crone planked down another plate in front of Marcia. Sidling to the door, she called out, like a screech of rusty hinges:

"Renny! Lollie! Come and eat!"

There was a sound like bare feet running. Marcia braced herself as the boy Renny burst in, spied her, and stopped short, glaring. But apparently hunger overrode his hostility for the moment, for he slid into the chair on Victor's left. Gran sat at the foot of the table. . . .

They waited. And presently, stealing in with a fawn-like hesitancy, the girl Lollie came. Across from the vacant place she slid into her chair and sat, wide-eyed, staring at Marcia with child-like admiration.

"She's not a mean lady—she's a golden-haired princess, isn't she, Vic?" she burst out in delight, then turned wistfully to Marcia.

"What happened to the jewel? I wanted it so! It was so pretty, all rainbow colors. It . . . *ooh*!"

The cry was wrung from her, and a hand flew to her face. Already an angry welt was appearing along her cheek—inflicted by no means that Marcia could see.

Tears welled up in the wide brown eyes. Lollie huddled, silent, in her chair. For a moment she sat there, gulping back tears. Then forlornly she took a piece of corn-pone, a spoonful of rutabaga turnips, and began to eat with quick nervous gestures.

In the table's center was a lone brandied peach in a compote. Now, spying it, the girl put out an eager hand for the morsel, turning to her older brother.

"Could I . . . have that?" her lips formed.

Victor nodded, smiled tenderly, and then shoved the compote toward her. Beaming again, child-like, Lollie took the peach on her plate. But, as Marcia watched, she carefully cut off a tiny piece. This fragment she popped into her mouth with relish.

Then, reaching across the table to that vacant place, the girl laid the larger piece on the empty plate. Her brown eyes regarded it longingly for an instant. But, with a faint sigh, she went back to her turnips and corn-pone.

Marcia turned to her host, the question plain in her eyes. His reply was a bitter smile and a shrug.

"But," Marcia whispered, "surely you don't actually set a place at the table for . . . for the—?"

Her words were cut short, for at that moment pandemonium broke loose. A salt-and-pepper set on the table began to dance madly. Without warning they rose two feet above the tablecloth and dangled there in midair for a split second. Then, with vicious force, they flew at Lollie's head.

The girl ducked as from long practice. But at once a veritable barrage of silverware flew at her. Cups and plates danced, now at one end of the table, now at the other. The compote turned over, spilling peach juice all over the cloth. Then something rattled in the nearby cupboard, and

from that direction another barrage of silverware flew at the cowering Lollie.

Marcia stared, unable to move. Victor and Renny sat like stone images, while Lollie cringed and whimpered in her chair, shielding her head from the weird onslaught. Only old Gran rocked and shrieked with mirth, as if the Thing were a puppet show staged for her express enjoyment.

"He's mad! Ye've angered him again, Lollie—he wanted all of the peach!" she cackled, poking a finger at the morsel on the plate. "Ay, he's a mean one, that *poltergeist* of yours. Ye'd best give him his own way!"

Sobbing, speechless, the girl slid from her chair and ran out into the rainy dusk. A silver spoon flew against the screen door, seconds behind her—propelled, from beside Marcia's plate, by no more visible force than the air about her.

Victor Mason pushed back his chair and stood up, his face bleak. The haunted eyes were fixed on Marcia's white face grimly.

"Well?" he snapped. "You saw it, Miss Trent. That's the shadow in our house. For three generations we've lived like this, plagued by . . . something that science declares non-existent. We've had to stand by and watch three young girls of our family tormented by it every day, unable to help them. I daresay if I should marry, the Thing would attach itself to my daughter after Lollie's death. The same with Renny. So . . . normal life is impossible to us, as you see.

"We'll just have to go on living like this, shut off from everyone, for my sister's sake; seeing her suffer, defenseless against its rages and selfish whims . . . God!" he groaned through clenched teeth. "Do you imagine *you* can help her, when I've given my every waking thought to it?"

The boy Renny stared at them; Marcia could feel his intent eyes on her face. Old Gran had snatched the fragment of peach and was eating it, tittering to herself the while. And outside, like a voice suddenly given this mysterious Thing they had seen at work, the wind rose with a sound like mocking laughter.

Marcia laid down her piece of corn bread, her appetite gone. She leaned back in her chair, looking up at Mason.

"First Anne, then Silvia, now Lollie!" he was muttering. "The hell they went through, locked up in the asylum, with a lot of fool doctors picking at them eternally! Then they'd 'get better.' Those fools! Yapping about stigmata and hallucinations! You see, few strangers have ever seen the *poltergeist* perform, as it did tonight, Miss Trent. So the psychiatrists at the institution insisted it was only a hallucination, accompanied by stigmatic neuropathy. We could never convince them there was more to it than just the stigmata. So they'd send our girls home again—'cured'! And the *poltergeist* would start all over again. You see," he gestured wearily, "it's just a choice of Lollie's being miserable, locked in a cell, or fairly contented living here with us . . . and It. There's no cure . . . because it's not a disease, Miss Trent. It's a . . . a living demon."

Sleet hissed against the panes. Marcia shivered, but her eyes were narrowed with thought. Suddenly she gave Mason a keen look.

"Tell me," she asked abruptly, "were any of your women ancestors haunted by a *poltergeist* before your great-aunt Anne?"

Victor Mason shook his head. "No, it started with Anne—Grandpa's and Great-uncle Aubrey's young sister. Then there was Dad's sister, Silvia. And now it's Lollie. I know now that it will never leave us, so long as there's a young girl with Mason blood in her veins."

Marcia shoved back her chair and stood up with an effort. A faint, grim smile lit her blue eyes. They were bright with purpose.

"Not if we destroy it," she drawled. "Doctor Mason, I have a hunch that your Mason *poltergeist* will leave tonight . . . and never come back. You see," she stated calmly, "I believe I know what makes him tick. I . . . won't tell you now, but in the morning, just before I leave," she added mildly. "Perhaps you can trust me not to tell your secret then, because there won't be any."

Deliberately she looked at the glowering boy Renny, at the smirking old woman, at the ex-doctor.

Victor Mason stared at her. Then, bitterly, he snorted. "Grand-

standing, eh?" he snapped. "Well, that won't win you your freedom either! Let me warn you, it's twelve miles to the next farm . . . and they are friends of mine! I was right about you the first time!" he flared. "You're a selfish, featherbrained little fool! You don't care what happens to us or to my sister, so long as you get away from here unharmed! But get that out of your head, Miss Trent. You're not going to leave this place, and that's final."

Marcia's courage wavered. But her chin jerked up again, blue eyes flashing. "Take me to my room now, please," she said coldly. "I'm not bluffing, though: I've cornered your pet ghost—and he knows it!"

Mounting the dusty staircase again, however, her heart sank. The old house was so big and still! From the ceiling a spider dangled unexpectedly in front of her face. And as they reached the upper hall, a lean gray rat slithered into the shadows. Marcia gasped and clung to Victor Mason's arm, but his smile was derisive.

"You'll get used to it here," he drawled. "And you'll cease to fight after a while, as we all have."

He shoved open the door of her room and helped her to the big bed. Darkness was falling, so he lit a smoky oil lamp standing on the highboy. With a shiver Marcia sank down on the bed, sat looking up at Mason's sardonic face. He misunderstood her expression of fear, and snorted.

"If you're worried about my . . . bothering you," he muttered, "please don't. From now on, you're just another sister of mine, held prisoner in this house by something none of us can help. I—"

Marcia laughed aloud, nervously. "Oh, it's not you I'm worried about, Doctor Mason. I can see you consider me just a nuisance, an unfortunate accident."

The tall man smiled wryly. For a moment his haunted eyes held a wistful expression. "Do I?" he murmured. Then, crisply: "Of course," he snapped. "Then what are you afraid of?"

Marcia took a deep breath. "I'm afraid for my life," she blurted. "You see, I . . . I deliberately put myself on the spot down there when I said I knew the secret of your *poltergeist.* I think I do know *what* causes it . . . but we must have proof. So . . . Doctor Mason, will you

take that room across the hall and . . . and come at once if I scream for help? I have a feeling there'll be an attempt to murder me tonight!''

Victor Mason squinted at her, and then emitted a short laugh. ''Renny, you mean? I rather thought Lollie's attitude toward you at dinner changed his opinion . . . but of course,'' he jeered, ''if you're afraid of the boy, I'll play sentry. That is,'' he laughed callously, ''if I don't fall asleep. Night watchmen shouldn't tank up on mountain corn, as I've been doing these seven years!''

With a twisted smile, he strode out, closing the bedroom door behind him. Marcia huddled in the big bed, wrapped in the single quilt, and sat listening tensely for a long time. The storm had subsided, but rain dripping from the eaves had the sound of stealthy footfalls. Her nerves crisped at every creak of old walls and the skittering of rats in the attic.

Then exhaustion bore down on her. Her eyes closed, jerked open, closed again. . . .

She awoke with a sick feeling of not knowing where she was. The big room was gloomy and full of shadows that writhed and danced when a gust of wind reached the oil lamp. Marcia blinked, rubbed her eyes . . . and her breath caught in her throat as the tiny sound that had waked her came again.

The doorknob was turning slowly. Now, as she stared, the door swung softly open. Renny Mason, his boyish face contorted, sidled into the room. And the lamplight gleamed on something gripped in his childish fist . . . a long-bladed cane-knife.

Lying on her back, Marcia steeled herself not to move, but lay watching with half-closed eyes. She bunched her muscles for a leap as the boy tiptoed nearer and nearer the bed. Now he stood glaring down at her, knife poised. . . .

But the ugly weapon did not strike. Renny's chin quivered suddenly. His arm lowered. With a sob of defiance he faced the door. In the hallway a shadow moved, hissed urgently.

''I can't! I can't!'' the boy whimpered. ''She d-doesn't look like a mean lady! She—''

The door swung wider. Marcia almost cried out as the old crone,

Gran, scuttled into the room. Her wizened face was a mask of hate and cruelty.

"Kill her! Cut her throat, you coward!" she rasped. "You want her to tell everyone and have them come for Lollie? Eh? Where she'll be locked in a dark cell, and never see daylight? Where they'll torture her and starve her? Kill that spying little fool, then, and shut her mouth! Kill her, sonny!"

The boy hesitated, turned back to the bed, knife raised. Then, with a dry sob, he flung the weapon to the carpet and cowered against the bed.

"I won't! I won't kill her!" he gulped, trembling. "She wouldn't hurt Lollie! I . . . I like her. And she gave Lollie a pretty jewel, only the *poltergeist* took it and gave it to you. . . . I won't kill her! I'm sorry I tried to shoot her!"

Marcia lay, frozen, watching the old woman. The mummy face was hideous now, quivering with fury.

"Disobey me, will ye?" she snarled. "All right, young mister! Ye'll be sorry for it, that ye will!"

Suddenly the beady eyes seemed to glow like live coals. The old hag tensed—staring, Marcia saw, not at Renny but at the fallen knife. . . .

Without warning, the weapon rose into the air, as though caught by a gust of wind. Up it went, with the old woman's eyes fixed on it. Ceiling-high, it poised, dangling above Marcia's unprotected body on the bed.

The knife fell—with a swifter motion than was natural to any law of gravity. But at the same instant, Marcia screamed and threw her body sidewise. The pain that it caused her sprained ankle was excruciating, but it saved her life.

Hilt-deep, the cane-knife stuck up in the mattress where her stomach had been the instant before.

And Victor Mason, blinking bloodshot eyes, stumbled into the room.

"Wh-what's going on?" he muttered sleepily, and spied the knife. His eyes widened. "Renny! Boy, you didn't . . . you couldn't!"

Marcia steadied herself with great effort, swung her feet to the floor, grimacing with pain. "No, Doctor Mason," she managed. "He . . .

didn't do it. The knife was dropped from the ceiling, by no visible hand. The *poltergeist* again. But . . . where's your sister?''

''Why,'' Mason blurted, ''she's locked in her room downstairs. We always lock her in at night. Seems to make her feel safer. But . . . the *poltergeist?* It's never thrown things before without Lollie in the room.''

Marcia shook her head, bewildered. Her eyes traveled from Doctor Mason to the sobbing Renny. They flickered to old Gran, crouched by the door, mouthing obscenities.

''Then it . . . isn't Lollie who causes it,'' the girl whispered. ''It isn't you, Doctor Mason—or you, Renny. So . . . it must be . . . it's got to be—''

She broke off with a gasp of certainty, for the old hag had recoiled as though she had been struck. The wrinkled lips writhed. The mummy hands lifted with a jerk, claw-like fingers pointing at Marcia in the manner of a hypnotist.

And a dozen small objects abruptly hurtled through the air—a comb from the dresser, a bud vase from the table, Marcia's compact.

From all over the room, as though blown by an unfelt wind, the eerie missiles flew straight at Marcia's head. She cowered, trying to shield her face. A small Godey's print, wrenched from the wall, struck her forehead, and she cried out. Gran shrieked with laughter.

''You! I'll fix ye, good and proper! Ye meddlin' little fool!'' the old woman snarled. ''See that? There's precious few can do it! See? See?''

From where they had fallen, the small objects flew at Marcia again.

As suddenly they dropped. Gran choked, eyes bulging. She sagged against the door, clutching at her heart. Then, buoyed up by a last spurt of venom, she jeered at the staring trio.

''Ay!'' she gasped. ''It was me! It's always been me and no other! *'Poltergeist!'* Heh-heh-heh! All these years I've made them believe in it and feel it and almost see it—Anne, and Silvia, and Lollie, all as thought they was better than me! Fools—''

Marcia gaped at her, sickened by the cruelty in that old face.

''I see!'' she whispered. ''I understand now! Oh, it's diabolical, Doctor Mason! You said she married into your family by trickery; and

she was furious at being snubbed by your womenfolk. She hated all you Masons as a symbol of what she wanted to be but never could. Hate was like poison in her veins. So she set out to break you, to destroy you little by little.

"Your great-aunt Anne must have been a sensitive, high-strung young girl, easily bullied and frightened by something she could not understand. And Gran here had a peculiar talent to scare her with! It's bestowed on very few people at birth. Certain wizards of ancient times could do what she did just now; also a few professional mediums of today. It's called the power to 'levitate.' Some kind of electrical wave in the body of the subject can be directed at small objects with such force as to move, lift, or throw them a short distance. I happened to read an article about it, written for the Society of Psychic Research. Science knows very little about the phenomenon; but then, we have much to learn about telepathy and hypnotism. In the next century we may know as much about the electrical powers of the human body as we have learned about radio in this century."

Victor Mason gaped at her, then at the mouthing old woman. "I don't understand," he mumbled. "You mean, there's no—?"

"No *poltergeist,* and there never was any," Marcia nodded. "But this fiendish old woman has created such a strong illusion of one that you've all believed it. She must have levitated objects around Anne Mason until she frightened the girl into believing she was haunted by a demon. By subtle suggestion that the Thing might scratch her, she got the girl into such a hysterical state that stigmata appeared. When you told me the *poltergeist* didn't throw things where strangers could watch, Doctor Mason, I suspected what it was. I guessed *whom,* too, when you said there had been no 'haunted' Mason before Gran's advent. Genuine psychic phenomena can be witnessed by anyone.

"But your great-aunt here was too clever to risk detection. She confined her performances to your terrified family, or to those few whom she thought too stupid to suspect anything. At the asylum, of course, the *poltergeist* never did perform—because Gran wasn't around. So the doctors concluded that that part was only a hysterical hallucination of Anne's, or Silvia's.

"Their stigmata, however, kept on even when not accompanied by the other Thing, the levitating. Naturally the girls were still hysterical, even under treatment. Without the flying objects to scare them, they gradually got better and were sent home 'cured.' What the psychiatrists couldn't know, of course, was that the *poltergeist*—in the form of your great-aunt—was waiting to begin its reign of terror all over again. You see?"

The ex-doctor leaned weakly against the bed, his arm around his little brother's shoulder. They stared, stunned, from the girl to the old hag.

"It's so inhuman," Marcia shuddered, "I can hardly believe it myself! Those innocent, high-strung young girls, thinking they were haunted by a demon . . . when they were only being tortured by a wicked sadistic old woman with—well, call it a supernatural power to levitate small objects."

"Some day, perhaps, the general public will understand and control the same power," he predicted, "and use it to good advantage."

"Your great-aunt used it to good advantage! She's frightened and bullied all you Masons, using the *poltergeist* to enforce her selfish whims . . . like that brandied peach tonight, that Lollie wanted so badly. And the jeweled brooch she stole from me, after I tried to give it to your sister. And the way she tormented Lollie by 'throwing' things at her, to make you and Rennie suffer from your inability to protect the child. . . . Oh! You diabolical old witch! Three helpless young girls—"

She whirled on the old woman, sick with indignation.

Gran cowered against the door, tittering. Her beady eyes flickered from the girl to Renny, to Victor's stunned face. And she broke out in a wild cackle of mirth.

"Ay, it's true!" she shrilled. "A pack of fools, the lot of ye! I've had my way in this house, for all your hoity-toity manners! *Poltergeist!* 'Demon!' Heh-heh-heh . . . !"

The beady eyes bulged suddenly, and Gran clawed at her throat, panting. With a strangled sound she slid to the floor in an ugly heap. Victor Mason, moving like one hypnotized, strode to her, knelt, and felt her pulse. He stood up, shaking his head.

"She's dead," he whispered. "Heart attack. But . . . I can't believe it!" He turned to Marcia, bewildered. "That stupid old woman! All these years!"

With a gesture of repugnance he covered Gran's evil face with her shawl and did not look at her again.

Marcia shrugged. "She wasn't stupid; she was fiendishly clever. Oh, those poor girls! And Lollie! If only someone had guessed!"

She broke off as Renny, who had slipped from the room unnoticed, came back at that moment, leading his fawn-eyed sister by the hand. In his other hand was Marcia's purse. His boyish face puckered, fighting tears, as he thrust it out to her. Smiling gently, she took out the brooch and slipped it into Lollie's hand.

Lollie gasped in delight. "For me? I can have them now? Oh, look, Vic! Look, Renny! The pretty jewels—they're mine too . . . *ooh!*"

Pain flashed across her face, and she jerked back her hand. Four angry weals were appearing along her forearm again. Renny and Victor Mason stared at them fearfully. But Marcia smiled, and put a protective arm about the girl, shaking her head.

"Don't be afraid, dear," she soothed. "The *poltergeist* is dead. It can't hurt you. . . . Just the stigmata," she whispered to Mason. "A nervous reflex, and nothing more. Poor child.

"It will be a long time before you can get the child back to normal. But . . . you must do it, Doctor Mason. It's your incentive to start life over again. Now you'll stop drinking, perhaps build yourself a country practice. And Renny must go to school; Lollie too when she's better. You have no shadow to hide now in this lovely old house."

Victor Mason raised his head. The despair in his dark eyes had given way to a clear alert look, full of hope and a deep gratitude . . . and something else. Marcia saw it and lowered her eyes hastily to Lollie's upturned face. But she heard the tall doctor chuckle softly, like a man with purpose—like a man awakened in a sunlit room from a long and horrible nightmare.

THE GREEN WINDOW

It is one of those old Colonial structures, with great fluted columns in front and a kitchen detached from the house by a long hall-porch. There are half a dozen just like it in Stuartsboro—but if you are driving through here, if you will ask any of our leisurely moving inhabitants, they will gladly direct you to "the house with the green window." Anyone, that is, except myself. I would not go near the place for any reason whatsoever. I'll never go back there. *Never.*

There is nothing to see. The beautiful old grounds have grown up now in mustard and jimson weed. The large plaster fountain on the lawn runs no more; it is full of stagnant rainwater, probably, at this season, and choked with last autumn's leaves that drifted down from the giant whiteoaks standing like sentinels before the house. Furthermore, the windows have been boarded up—even that queer opaque one to the left of the fanlighted door. Especially that one. . . . There are ten-penny nails in the heavy planks that cover it from sight. Otherwise, Aunt Millicent insists, passing tourists would swarm in with claw hammers and rip them off, to take a peek at those panes. The American tourist is a predatory animal; he would break pieces off the Venus de Milo to take home a souvenir to the folks. Several times the

"window lights," as panes are called locally, have been broken out by the curious, by would-be detectives of the supernatural who yearn to give that weird green glass a laboratory test.

I wish I could see their faces when they smugly take it out of pocket or handbag, back home again, with a tale to tell the neighbors. For, whatever it is that causes the glass in that one particular window of the old Dickerson home to cloud over, it disappears about half an hour after the panes are removed from the window frame. I don't know why. Jeb and Mark and I, as children, have scraped them with razor blades, peered at them under our toy microscopes, and smeared all sorts of acids on them. But the green scum—that is what it looks like; a foul grayish-green scum on the surface of a pool—seems to be *inside* the glass, under surface. I could not tell you how many times the opaque discolored panes have been replaced by ordinary glass, only to cloud over again by sunset of the next day.

But that is not its attraction. The "green window" is supposed to be a prophetic window, an opening into the future; or, more accurately, a mirror for tomorrow. The story is: when Great-great Grandpa Dickerson was thrown from his horse and lay dying in that room, over a century ago, he called for an old slave on the Place, a wizened old Negress purported to be a *mamaloi.* The plantation was heavily in debt, and it seems the old boy was worried about the welfare of his wife and two small sons. Lying there on the brocade couch, with his spine broken from the fall, he had begged the old voodoo woman to look into the future for him, to help his widow make necessary plans.

She had done so, the story goes, using that window as a sort of "psychic screen." All the Evil Ones that crowd about someone who is dying, she had summoned to that spot—it was their fetid breath, she explained, that clouded the glass panes. But there was only one trick of dark magic in her power: to make a mirror of that opaque window, in which could be seen the dim reflection of the room where her master lay dying. A reflection of the room, yes—not as it looked at the moment, but as it *would* look, at some unnamed future date, when the *next* person in the house should die. The mental picture of that mumbling old black crone, of the sobbing wife cuddling her two

terrified children before that slowly darkening window, has always been vivid to me.

All my life, of course, I have heard family tales about its prophecies. But the old Place itself has become a white elephant, tax-ridden and run-down. Mother married a Virginian and moved away, but she would never sell her equity in the property to Mark's father or to Jeb's mother, my uncle and aunt. Jeb's mother married a local lawyer and moved across town, but Mark and his father lived on at the old Homeplace, selling off some of the land when the old man had his stroke. It was, I may add, somewhat of a disappointment that his actual death occurred in a hospital. I think half the people in Stuartsboro had planned to "drop in" at the moment of his demise, for a peek into that prophetic window. No death had occurred in the house for seventy-two years—a fact I believe people resentfully accused our family of arranging, just for spite.

As a matter of fact, none of my generation believed in the hoodoo. We grinned about it fondly, the way others smile at myths about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Mark, Jeb, and I—children of the Depression and the Second World War—were not inclined to believe in anything we couldn't see and touch. Jeb took over his father's meager law practice in Stuartsboro, and managed to support himself and his widowed mother. Mark sold off more and more land, then went into the Air Corps. He came back with a charming little bride, a redhead with a bright gamin-face and a Brooklyn accent you could cut with a knife.

They were such a gay, fun-loving young couple that I began visiting them, or Jeb, every summer after my teaching job closed in June. Mark was small, arrogant, with the lazy good looks of a Spanish don. Jeb was tall, lanky, good-humored, and wore glasses that ruined whatever good looks he might have inherited from Aunt Millicent. As a girl, I often toyed with the idea of marrying one or the other of them, if they had not been my first cousins. Occasionally we would pretend among ourselves that they were my brothers.

But after Sherry came, with her light laugh and boundless energy, I had to take a backseat as their "best girl." Mark worshipped his little

redhead; he became restless and bored unless they were in the same room.

It was easily apparent, too, that Jeb was in love with her, in that quiet, awkward way of his. I felt sorry for him, because it was just as easy to see that Sherry's attention was all for her husband.

The plantation had dwindled now to only the grounds around the house, hardly an acre. Small houses had sprung up like mushrooms all about it, making it look like a dignified old dowager drawing her skirts haughtily away from a flock of tenement children. Mark started a real-estate office, failed at it; built a movie drive-in outside of town and had to sell it at a loss; found two more jobs, and lost them. Then the family—especially Jeb, Randolph, and I—became distressed because of his drinking. He drank all the time now, lounging around the house in an old dressing-gown with a highball tinkling in his hand.

We all worked at getting him back on his feet. Jeb and I dropped in several times a day to pull him out of one of his moody spells. And Sherry was never more cheerful and loving. I often noticed the stiff, pained look on Jeb's face when she sat down in Mark's lap, throwing her arms around him and kissing him with the child-like abandon that was her greatest charm. She invented things to amuse him around the house—small tasks to take his mind off his failures; little games to coax him out of his despondency.

One morning when we dropped by, she had been cleaning out the attic, and had come across an old letter wedged into a skylight. It was brown with age, streaky with rain, and almost illegible. But Sherry had made out the fine cramped old-fashioned handwriting, and was perched on Mark's chair arm, reading it aloud to him excitedly.

"Liz, Jeb—it's about the green window!" she called as we entered. "Some relative of yours, way back there. . . . It's signed 'Lucy.' There's a blot on it, see? It's unfinished; she must have been writing to somebody, and spilled ink on her letter. Then the skylight rattled, and she or the servants stuffed the page in to wedge it. . . ."

"Sherlock!" Mark laughed, jerking a thumb at her. "She's got it all figured out . . . Jeb," he chuckled, "the 'Lucy' was Aunt Lucy

Dickerson, Grandfather's maiden sister. She never did have all her marbles, I remember Dad used to say. And this letter proves it!''

''Something about the window?'' I asked, amused at Sherry's excitement, ''What'd the old gal say? Read it!''

''Well, it starts off in the middle of a sentence,'' Sherry said importantly. ''Must have been the second page of her letter, or some such. She's thanking somebody for the funeral flowers they sent, as I make it out. ' . . . *beautiful wreath,*' it starts out. *'There were so many lovely flowers, and poor dear Ellen looked so natural, lying there in the casket. . . .'* ''

Mark, Jeb, and I yelped with laughter in chorus.

''That's Aunt Lucy, all right!'' Jeb nodded. ''She was always going on about somebody's funeral. Liked to cry, so she went to 'em all! What else does it say?''

Sherry made a face at us. ''All right! Laugh! I'll skip a few sentences, where she tells what the pastor said about . . . Allen? No, it's Ellen. . . .''

''That was Grandma,'' Mark told her. ''Died of cancer, poor old gal. . . . Say!'' he burst out, suddenly interested. ''She *was* the last person to die here in the house, wasn't she? Aunt Lucy nursed her for years. Old maid. She lived for the family; never had any life of her own.''

Jeb and I nodded. Sherry was poring over the stained letter-fragment again, trying to make out the words in faded ink.

'' '. . . . my dear, what I saw in the window! You'd never believe . . . ' '' she read. *'' 'Never believe . . . '* something-something; it's blotted out. ' . . . *'twas an Oriental,'* '' she made out another phrase or two. *'' 'Sitting there in Father's chair with a turban on his head—if indeed 'twas a man, dear Martha—and. . . .'* ''

We laughed again uproariously.

''Good old Aunt Lucy!'' Mark hooted. ''Wasn't that about the time of the Yellow Peril talk? When everybody thought the Chinese were going to take over the country? And the gals sneaked around, reading Indian love-lyrics?''

Jeb grinned, nodding. ''Guess Aunt Lucy took it from there, plant-

ing a rajah in our parlor! She had so little romance in her life. . . ."

Sherry gave him a sharp look I could not translate. "Aunt Lucy isn't the only one," she muttered cryptically. "Don't you even want to hear the rest of it? All about a thief breaking in to steal the rajah's treasure, and the Oriental shoots him—she saw it all in the window, the letter says. There's a cap pulled down over the burglar's face. When the Oriental sees who he's shot, he falls sobbing on the body of the young boy. Maybe his brother, she says, or his son. . . ."

"Good grief! How corny!" Mark held his nose expressively. "Mother told me Aunt Lucy used to read dime novels all the time—and I can well believe it! Kept 'em hidden between the leaves of a *Godey's Lady's Book. . . .*"

Sherry gave us one glance of disgust. She flung the wadded letter into the fireplace, then whirled on us, directing most of her temper at Mark.

"All right, of course it's silly! But we could *pretend,* couldn't we? You three are so . . . stuffy about everything! Mark half-drunk all the time, and we never go anywhere any more! I never have any new clothes or . . . or. . . ." Tears welled into her pretty brown eyes. "Or anything but family pride!"

Mark went white, averting his eyes from our faces. I could not think of a word to say, but Jeb, with admirable tact, leaped into the breach.

"Sure," he said gently. "We're getting to be a bunch of stick-in-the-muds. That's why Liz and I ran by this morning, to persuade you two to go to the Lindsay's dance at the country club. We. . . ."

"Not going," Mark snapped. "Sally Lindsay yapping in my ear, and Jay handing out those dishwater cocktails like they were champagne . . . !"

Sherry looked at him, temper sparkling in her eyes. She compressed her lips, fighting for self-control, then burst the dam:

"Maybe *you're* not going. But *I* am! Jeb will take me, and Liz can go with that drip of a Joe Kimball who keeps trying to marry her off. She's too smart, though! Marriage is . . . a bog hole! Ours is, anyhow! . . . Come on, Liz," she whirled and swept out of the room to run upstairs. "I'll take some clothes, and dress at Jeb's with you. Mark can sit here and *drown* in his bourbon. I'll spend the night at Aunt Millicent's!"

She came running down again with a lavender tulle dress, slip, and gold sandals, and stalked out to the car with no further word to Mark. Jeb and I mumbled something to our cousin; but he was already gulping down several slugs of whiskey in white-lipped anger, and did not reply. We followed Sherry out to the car, and drove away, not blaming her, only wishing Mark would find his way again and return to his old self.

On the way to Aunt Millicent's, Sherry became contrite, but covered it by chattering about the letter she had found in the attic.

"Oriental potentate!" she laughed. "With a turban on his head, and a flowered robe! She really dreamed that one up, didn't she? It's not so fantastic, though. The window didn't predict the date, by any chance? Say, December seventh, 1941 . . . ?"

We fell in with her mood and began to kid each other about the Japanese Invasion of Stuartsboro that might have actually come off in 1941, but hadn't quite made it. At noon I discreetly called Mark on the phone, but he sounded very drunk when he answered. Sighing, I hung up, and went ahead with our plans for the dance.

What I had forgotten to tell Sherry was, it was a masquerade ball. She was disappointed, for she had a lovely little Pierrette costume at home. She would not go back after it, however, so I promised to get her some kind of costume, if I had to lend her my own "Colonial belle" outfit—inherited from Grandmother, complete with powdered wig and hoopskirt.

Meanwhile, Mark was sulking in the big cool parlor, with a mystery novel held upside down in his hand and a half-empty decanter beside him on the floor. He was in pajamas and dressing-robe, as usual, with a two-day growth of beard on his puffy face. He also had a splitting headache, and had tied a rubber icebag on his head. I could picture him when I phoned—a tragi-comic figure, sulking there in the semi-gloom.

He sat there, pretending to read, until the sun sank below the Blue Ridge foothills. Then, still muttering things he wished he had thought to say, he fell into an alcoholic doze. . . .

About midnight, he awakened with a start. His head was pounding. The dim light from a lamp in the hall illuminated the high-ceiled room

palely. Mark heard a faint scraping noise to his right. Somebody was prying at the window that faced on the garden, trying to open it, trying to get in.

Dizzily, his heart pounding, Mark slid out of his chair and made his way over to a cabinet where his father had kept a collection of pistols and knives. His fumbling hand found one weapon, a blunt-nosed automatic. Mark could not remember whether it was loaded or not; but, he thought, it might scare the prowler. He waited, motionless in the half-dark, eyes glued to that window across the room. Beside it, locked as always, the green window—the prophetic green window—gleamed back at him like a shadowy mirror.

The window raised slowly. A figure in slouchy pants and a patched white shirt climbed up stealthily, shinnying up the trellis outside. A tweed cap was pulled far down over the intruder's eyes. A knife held between the teeth, a knife that had been used to pry open the window, gave the lower part of the face an evil, distorted look.

Mark took careful aim, and pulled the trigger. No one was more startled than he was at the deafening explosion that rocked the room, filling it with the acrid stench of cordite.

The intruder screamed—a high-pitched cry of anguish and pain—then toppled forward over a chair, knocking it to the floor. Mark quickly switched on the light, aiming at the marauder again. But a gasping cry stopped him.

"Mark! Don't shoot—it's me! I left my latchkey! Thought you were in bed."

Then Mark cried out, throwing himself to his knees beside the still figure lying face up on the rug. It was Sherry—in an old pair of Jeb's pants, a shirt of mine, and someone's borrowed cap: the "Bowery thug" costume she wore to the masquerade dance. Moaning, Mark gathered her up in his arms. He rocked back and forth, crooning to her as her blood flowed out over his dressing-gown.

And the green window began to glow with a weird radiance, mirroring the room as it had many times before, according to my parents and grandparents. A picture began to take shape in its shadowy frame, like a dim movie. My cousin Mark raised his head, holding his

dead wife in his arms and watching the pattern of the future unfold in those green panes.

The day before the funeral, Jeb left Stuartsboro abruptly. Even Aunt Millicent could not explain his sudden departure, following a decision to join a law firm in New York. I was there, standing beside Mark as a loving sister might uphold a bereaved brother. He seemed stunned and vague. Now and again I caught him staring at me all during the service. There was a deep bewilderment in his piercing gaze, a look of horror that transcended even what I expected him to feel. Was it only his great sense of loss?

"Mark, dear," I whispered. "Get hold of yourself. *I'm* still around."

After the interment of pretty, shallow little Sherry, we were riding back from the cemetery. At my words, Mark broke his sober silence abruptly.

"Liz," he said quietly, "I have a hunch she was running away with Jeb, that night after the dance. He must have been waiting for her. She just came back for her clothes, probably—though I let Jeb believe it was to make up with me. . . . She wasn't. You see, I know. I lost Sherry, not by death," he said heavily, "but a long time ago, to Jeb. Didn't you suspect?"

I stared at him, amazed. "Sherry? I knew he was in love with *her,* but. . . . Whatever gave you the idea that she . . . ? Why, Sherry adored you!"

"No." Mark's smile twisted. "She didn't," he said heavily. "She told me over a year ago that she'd married me for a meal-ticket, one of those war marriages. If Jeb would have taken her, she'd have left me long ago . . . but I played on his sympathy, let myself go to seed, just to keep her. Out of loyalty to me, Jeb held out against her . . . until the night of the dance, is my bet. He blames himself for the whole mess, but of course I should have given her up to him long ago. Well. . . ." He straightened his shoulders with an effort. "That's all over now. Think I'll go back into the Army. And, Liz. . . ." He hesitated queerly. "It might be well for you to sell the old Place. We must never

go back there, the three of us. I told Jeb if we did, there'd be tragedy. That I saw *murder* in the green window that night. . . ."

My eyes widened. "Mark!" I took his hand in both of mine; he stared oddly at our entwined fingers. "You told him *that?* No wonder he left so suddenly! He must have thought you meant you were going to kill him, or he you! . . . Oh, Mark!" I sighed. "The three of us grew up together. We've been so close, I couldn't bear this town without you both. Look here!" I laughed. "Are you forcing me to marry Joe Kimball and move to Idaho with him? No sir! I won't do it! I'll stay here with Aunt Millicent and grow into a lonely old maid like Aunt Lucy, without you and Jeb around. . . . Mark, I'm ashamed to confess I've rather resented Sherry barging in and taking both my . . . my best beaux! So now, please, I'd like to have you back! With a little teamwork, we could make the old Place into a tourist hotel. Call it 'The Three Cousins'. . . ."

Mark did not respond to my attempt at levity.

His dark eyes were still searching my face with that bewildered expression. He shook his head slowly, and patted my hand.

"No . . . we've got to board it up. Don't . . . don't ever open it, Liz. . . . How little people really know about each other!" he muttered. "I about Jeb, or he about me, or both of us about. . . . Only the green window really *knows. . . .*" He passed a shaky hand over his forehead. "I wonder. If I'd been forewarned by that letter, could I have prevented the accident to Sherry? Do you think . . . ? Liz, if we never go near the old home again, the three of us together, how can it happen, the thing I saw . . . ?"

I shivered at the peculiar look of dread on my cousin's face. The car had rolled to a halt in front of the old Dickerson home, built by our great-great-grandfather nearly two centuries ago. The murky green window stared out at us like a blind eye, seeing not the present but the future—the incredible future, like that strange trick of fate which had caused Mark to shoot his adored wife and Jeb to leave his hometown forever.

"Mark," I demanded, "What did you see in the window, the night poor Sherry . . . ? Mark, she's gone now, and you and Jeb must forgive

each other! We three have to stick together, as we did when we were children. Blood is thicker than water, Mark, and. . . .''

My cousin looked at me, and all at once he began to laugh harshly.

''Blood?'' he said queerly. ''That's what I saw, Liz! Blood all over the room, that shadow-room inside the window, our parlor as it will look . . . I don't know when. Next month. Next year. I don't know. Jeb and I were lying there on the floor, hacked to pieces. And someone was standing over us with . . . with an ax. Still . . . still *chopping*. . . . That's what I saw.''

I shuddered and hid my face against his shoulder. ''Oh, Mark! How awful! But it couldn't ever happen, of course,'' I laughed nervously. ''Jeb has gone, and you'll be gone next week. . . . D—did you see who it was? I mean, the face? Did it look like anyone we know?''

''Yes,'' my cousin held my hand tightly for a moment, then answered quietly. ''Yes, I saw the face. Liz . . . it was *you.*''

THE TREE'S WIFE

I smiled at my companion, Hettie Morrison, County Welfare investigator for the Bald Mountain district. When I dropped into her office that morning, mostly to dig up nostalgic old memories of our college days at the University of Virginia, I found her arguing over the telephone with a local mechanic. "But I have to make a field trip this morning! . . . WHY can't you get the parts? Take them out of somebody else's car! . . . Oh, the devil with what you think wouldn't be right! This family may be starving . . . !"

Hettie had hung up, still sputtering, a gaunt, severe-looking old maid with a heart as big as the Blue Ridge Mountains. She glanced up then, to see me grinning at her, jingling the car keys of my new club-coupé by way of an invitation. We were such close friends, no words were needed—Hettie merely jerked a nod, slammed on her hat, and started out the door with me in tow.

"You'll be sorry," she warned me. "The road I have to take is an old Indian trail—and if they had to get back and forth on *that,* no wonder they're called the Vanishing Americans! You'll break a spring."

I looked so dismayed, pausing to unlock my first new car in ten

years, that she closed one eye in a crafty look I knew so well, from days at college when she was about to ask the loan of my best hose.

"It's a dull trip, just routine fieldwork. Of course you wouldn't be interested," she drawled casually, "in Florella Dabney—the girl who married a tree. We pass right by the Dabney place. No, no, dear; you're liable to scratch up that nice blue paint. And Holy Creek crosses the road four times; we'd have to drive through it, hub-deep. I always get stuck and have to—"

I scowled at my old friend, familiar with all her clever tricks of getting her way, but still unable to cope with them.

"*Tree?*" I demanded. "Did you say—? Married a —?"

"That's right," Hettie nodded with a smug grin. "It's a strange case—almost a legend up around Bald Mountain. Although," she added, blatantly climbing into my car, "it's not without precedent, in the old Greek legends. Zeus was forever turning some girl into a spring, or a flower, or some inanimate object, so his wife Hera wouldn't find out about his goings on. Even as late as the fifteenth century, there were proxy weddings, where some queen or other married her knight's sword because he was off at war. Then, there's an African tribe in which the men are married, at puberty, to some tree."

I grimaced impatiently, climbed into the coupé, and started it with a jerk. Hettie had aroused my interest, and well she knew it. She would get her ride over the wild, bushy crest of Bald Mountain—or I would never find out about that girl who married a tree.

An hour later, bouncing over a rocky trail pressed closely on both sides by scrub pine and mountain laurel, she began to tell me about Florella Dabney—and the bloody feud that, a trained psychiatrist might explain, had left her a mental case with a strange delusion.

The Dabneys (Hettie related) had built their cabin and begun to wrest a living out of the side of Bald Mountain about the time of Daniel Boone. Six generations of underfed, overworked mountaineers had lived therein, planting a little, hunting a little, and raising a batch of children as wild as the foxes that made inroads on their chicken supply. Florella

was the youngest daughter, a shy willowy child of fifteen, with flowing dark hair and big luminous dark eyes like a fawn. Barefoot, clad in the simple gingham shift that all mountain girls wore, she could be seen running down the steep side of Old Baldy, as nimbly as a city child might run along a sidewalk. Her older brothers and sisters married and moved away, her mother died, and Florella lived with her father now on the sparse farm.

On the other side of the mountain lived another such family of "old settlers," the Jenningses. As far back as anyone could remember, there had been bad blood between the two, starting with a free-for-all over a load of cordwood, which had sent two Dabneys to the hospital and three Jenningses to jail. Both attended the little mountain church perched on the ridge that divided their farms, but no Jennings ever spoke to a Dabney, even at all-day singings, when everyone was pleasantly full of food and "home-brew." No Dabney would sit left of the aisle; and any baptizing that was done in Holy Creek, after a rousing revival meeting, had to be arranged with Jenningses and Dabneys immersed on alternate days. Reverend Posy Adkins, the lay preacher, recognized this as a regrettable but inevitable condition. And that was the law on Bald Mountain—up until the spring evening when Joe Ed Jennings and Florella Dabney "run off together."

When and how they had ever seen enough of each other to fall in love, neither family could imagine. Joe Ed was a stocky blond boy who could play a guitar and shoot the eye out of a possum at fifty yards—but not much else. What astonished everyone was Florella's regard for such a do-little, since she was halfway promised to a boy from Owl's Hollow. It was assumed, when a party of hunters saw them streaking through the woods one night, that Florella had been carried off by force, much against her will. She had gone out after one of the hogs, which had strayed. At midnight, when she had not returned, her pa, Lafe Dabney, went out to search for her, ran into the hunting party—and promptly stalked back to his cabin for his rifle.

He was starting out again, with murder in his close-set, mean little eyes, when a pair of frightened young people suddenly walked through

the sagging front gate. With them was Preacher Adkins, dressed either for a buryin' or a marryin', with the Good Book clutched in a hand that trembled. But he spoke steadily.

"Lafe, these two young'nes has sinned. But the Lord's likely done forgave 'em already. Now they aim to marry, so don't try an' stop it!"

Without preamble, he motioned for Florella and Joe Ed to stand under a big whiteoak that grew in the front yard, towering over the rough cabin and silhouetted darkly against the moonlit sky. High up on the trunk, if Lafe had noticed, was cut a heart with the initials J.E.J. and F.D.

Solemnly, the old preacher began to intone the marriage ceremony, while Florella's pa stood there staring at them, his lean face growing darker with fury, his tight mouth working. Hardly had the immortal words, "Do you take this man—?" been spoken, when he whipped the rifle to his shoulder and fired at Joe Ed, point-blank. The boy was dead as he crumpled up at his bride's small bare feet.

"I'll larn you to go sparkin' our girl behind my back!" Lafe roared. "You triflin' no-account!"

He never finished, for a second shot rang out in the quiet night. Lafe Dabney pitched forward on his face, crawled across the body of his prospective son-in-law, and fired twice toward the powder-flash in the woods beyond the cabin. A moment later, all hell broke loose—it seems that Reverend Adkins had expected just such a blow-up. Someone had carried the news to Joe Ed's pa. Clem Jennings had also hastened to the spot, to stop the wedding. The old preacher, fearing this, had notified "the law." The sheriff, with a hastily gathered posse, had showed up at the moment when Lafe and Clem fired at each other, over the body of young Joe Ed and the prostrate, sobbing form of his near-bride.

In a matter of minutes, the posse had both fathers handcuffed and hauled off to jail. But, behind them, they left a tragic tableau—little Florella weeping over the body of her lost lover, with old Reverend Adkins standing dumbly in the background. Two of the posse had stayed behind to help with Joe Ed's body, which the weeping girl had begged the preacher to bury, then and there, "under our tree." It was

there Joe Ed had first caught her and kissed her, holding his hand over her mouth and laughing, with Lafe not ten yards away. It was there, in the night, that she had first told him she loved him—and promised to slip away with him, into the deep silent woods of Old Baldy, for a lover's tryst forbidden by both their families. It was there, months later, terrified and ashamed, that she had sobbed out to him that she was with child. She knew there was nothing left but to kill herself. Her lover was a Jennings, and she had expected no more from him than a few moments of wild secret ecstasy.

But Joe Ed had surprised her. Fiercely protective and loyal, he had announced that, the following night, he would stand with her under the tree in the Dabneys' yard, and have Preacher Adkins marry them—right in front of old Lafe. His child must bear his name, the boy said proudly and tenderly, and he hoped it would be a fawn-eyed little girl exactly like Florella.

All this old Preacher Adkins related to the two members of the posse, while they took turns digging a grave for Joe Ed Jennings—at the foot of the big whiteoak under which he was to have been married. Florella stood numbly by, watching and no longer crying, like a trapped animal at last resigned to its bitter fate.

But, regarding her, the old lay-preacher suddenly remembered a story from his school days, a myth, a legend. Walking over to the girl, he took her hand quietly and led her over to the tree, where the two pitying neighbors were just patting the last spadeful of dirt over Joe Ed's crude grave.

"Daughter," the old preacher said, "I've heard tell of queens in the old days marryin' a sword that belonged to some feller that'd been kilt in battle. Now, Joe Ed, he'd want you should go ahead and take his name—so I'm goin' t' make out like this-here tree is Joe Ed, him bein' buried underneath it. I want you two men," he faced the gravediggers solemnly, "to witness this-here marryin'—of Joe Ed Jennings and Florella Dabney." He raised his eyes humbly. "If hit's a wrong thing I'm doin', punish me, Lord. If hit's right, bless this-here ceremony!"

There in the moonlit night, the old preacher proceeded with that strange proxy wedding of a girl to a tree. The two members of the

posse stood by, wide-eyed and amazed, as they heard Reverend Adkins repeat the familiar words of the marriage ceremony. Heard Florella's sobbing replies. And then heard—was it only wind in the great tree towering above them? Or was it—? Both men later swore that what they heard sounded like a whispering voice. A man's voice, Joe Ed's, coming from the depths of those thick green branches. But (as Hettie remarked dryly) it had been a hysterical night, and hysteria can play weird tricks on the human senses numerous times.

"Well? That isn't *all?*" I demanded as my car lurched madly into Holy Creek's third crossing and plunged wetly out again. "What happened to the girl? With her father in prison, who looked after her while—? Was the child all right?"

"Slow down, you idiot!" Hettie snapped at me pleasantly, clinging to the car door on her side. "Yes, of course, the child was all right. A little girl. I had Welfare send a doctor out here, when we got the message that Florella was in labor. She had been living on in her father's cabin, quite alone—for the simple reason that all her relatives and all of Joe Ed's were afraid to come near the place!"

I frowned, puzzled. "Why?"

"Because of the tree," Hettie said blandly. "Word got around that it was haunted. That Joe Ed had 'gone into that oak' and—well, that it was alive. Sentient, that is. That it—didn't behave like a tree anymore. I must say—look out for that rock, you goose! Want to wreck this thing?—I must say some of the things that happened were—odd, to say the least!"

I slowed down obediently, picking my way over the rocky road. Anything to keep Hettie on the story that had so captured my imagination!

"What things?" I demanded. "Anybody can hear voices in the wind. Leaves rustling. Branches rubbing together."

"But," Hettie drawled, "just anybody can't see a tree catch a live rabbit, or a dove that has lit on a branch of it. Just anybody can't—"

"*What?*" I gaped at her. "I never heard of anything so ridiculous!"

My attempted laugh sounded flat, however, even to my own ears. "How on earth could—?"

"Don't ask me," Hettie said cheerfully. "All I know is, the lower branch of that big whiteoak kept Florella supplied with meat. Rabbits, doves, once a possum. They—they got choked, some way. Got their necks caught in the twigs. She'd find them there, all ready to be cooked and eaten. The way any good mountaineer might trap to feed his family. So she got to believing—that *he* caught them. Joe Ed had quite a reputation as a hunter and trapper."

"Good Lord!" I tried to laugh again. "You're not hinting—? The poor kid," I broke off pityingly. "But an experience like that would naturally affect her mind. Living there all alone, too, with a baby!"

"Then," Hettie went on pleasantly, "there was the fall day, real cold, when a neighbor woman dropped in. Nosey old sister. Just wanted to say something spiteful to Florella about the baby. When she was leaving, though—well," Hettie chuckled, "it seems her coat got tangled in a tree branch that dipped down over the gate. It yanked the coat right off her back, the way she told it. She lit out of there, screaming bloody-murder, and told everybody that Joe Ed took her coat for Florella! When the girl tried to return it to her, she wouldn't touch it. Said it wasn't her best coat, anyhow, and she wasn't going to argue with a tree!"

"Oh, no!" I shook my head, laughing—but still trying to ignore a small shiver that kept running down my spine. "These mountain people are awfully superstitious, aren't they? Naturally, it was just the woman's fear that made her think—"

"Maybe," Hettie said dryly, "but it wasn't fear that snatched my new hat off last spring, when I happened to walk under that tree. Checking up on Florella—she's a hardship case, of course. Yessir," she said in a queer tone. "Big limb swooped down and snatched that bonnet right off my head. I couldn't reach it, and Florella couldn't climb up and get it. Too soon after the baby's arrival; poor girl was still kind of weak. But the way she giggled, and started talking to that tree like it was a person! Honestly, it made my flesh crawl, she was so

matter-of-fact about it! 'Joe Ed, you rascal,' she said, 'give Miss Hettie back her bonnet, now! I don't need no fancy clothes. Me and the baby's doin' just fine.' " Hettie peered at me, sheepishly. "'Way she said it made me feel like—like a selfish old turkey-gobbler! Besides, a hat like that was too pretty for an old hatchet-face like me. But it did give me a turn, I'll have to admit! When—" she gulped slightly, "when I told Florella she could have the hat, it—it immediately fell out of the tree. Plop! Right smack on that girl's head! I must say," she added crossly, "it was very becoming. Probably the first one she ever owned, poor little thing! Lafe was a stingy old coot; Florella's mother never had a rag she didn't weave herself!"

I turned the steering wheel sharply to avoid a raccoon ambling across the trail. Then I peered at Hettie.

"Go on," I said grimly. "Tell me how the tree shed its wood in stacks, so Florella wouldn't have to chop any!"

Hettie chuckled. "Oh, no. Mountain men take it for granted that their wives must work like mules. All they do is feed 'em, shelter 'em, and protect 'em—with an occasional pretty thrown in when they feel in a generous mood. That's what Florella expected from her tree-husband, and that's what she got. Though I suppose a psychologist would say her delusion gave her a sense of security that merely made her able to fend for herself. Lots of people need a crutch for their self-confidence—if it's only a lucky coin they carry around. Coincidence and superstition, hm?"

"Well," my friend smiled, "I *am* obliged to you for the lift. We had a message that Kirby Marsh, a farmer who lives near the Dabney place, got in a fight with somebody and crawled home, pretty banged up. His wife is bedridden, so they'll need help if he's seriously injured. You were a life-saver to bring me. This is the turn—" she broke off abruptly, grinning at me with a sly twinkle in her eye. "The Dabney farm is just around this bend."

I slowed down, feeling again that cold shiver run down my spine as we rounded the curve. An old cabin of square-hewn logs perched on the mountainside a few yards above the road, with the usual well in the

yard and the usual small truck-garden in back. A huge whiteoak towered over the gate of a sagging rail fence. Its sturdy trunk leaned a bit toward the house in a curiously protective manner, shading the worn front stoop with its thick dark-green foliage.

I braked the car outside the gate, and Hettie grinned at my expression.

"There it is," she announced dryly. "There's where the girl lives who married a tree. And that's the tree. That's *him.*"

I got out of the coupé and walked warily to the gate. Hettie climbed out stiffly, and called, in her pleasantly harsh voice:

"Hello? Hello the house?" in traditional mountain style.

There was no answer, but all at once I saw a quilt pallet spread under the oak Hettie had indicated as *"him."* A fair-haired baby girl was sprawled on the folded quilt, gurgling and cooing. She appeared to be about two years old, with the sturdy good health of most mountain children, despite their skimpy diet and constant exposure to the elements.

I stood watching her for a moment, charmed by the picture she made. Then I frowned.

"She's too young to be left alone," I muttered. "Where's her mother?"

"Oh, out picking blackberries, I guess." Hettie shrugged. "Josie's all right though. Her father's minding her," she added with another impish grin at my expression. "Hello!" she called again. "Florella!"

At that moment a lovely slender girl came running around the house, her feet bare, her dark hair flying. There was a sprig of laurel over her ear, and blackberry stains on her tanned fingers. I stared at her, thinking how like a dryad she looked—wild, free, and happily unafraid.

"Oh! Howdy, Miss Hettie!" she greeted my friend warmly. "Come in and set. Who's that with ye? Kinfolk?"

Hettie introduced me as a school chum, with no mention of the fact that I wrote stories of the supernatural for my bread and butter. We entered the gate, and Hettie stooped over to pat the baby, proffering a

peppermint from the endless supply she always seems to carry around. I fidgeted beside her, at a loss for conversation with this pretty, normal-looking young mother who, from all Hettie had told me, was as crazy as a coot. Once, nervously, I started as a limb of the great tree under which we stood brushed my shoulder, plucking at my scarf. On impulse, I took it off and gave it to the girl, who beamed and thanked me shyly, then tied it proudly around her own neck. I caught Hettie's eye at that moment—and flushed as she grinned, winked, and glanced up at the giant tree.

Then she turned to Florella, lovelier than ever in my blue chiffon scarf—and with no more madness in her face than in mine.

"I got word that Kirby Marsh was hurt in a fight," my friend said conversationally. "Anybody over there looking after his wife and kids? Heard the doctor came, and took Kirby to the hospital with concussion and a sprained shoulder. Must have been some fight, to have—"

Hettie broke off, noticing the girl's sudden expression of regret beyond the politeness expected of a neighbor. Florella ducked her head suddenly, with a rueful little smile.

"Yes, ma'm," she said simply. "He come over here to our place late last night, and went to pesterin' me. Oh, not that Kirby ain't a real nice feller," she apologized for her neighbor gently, "exceptin' when he's likkered up. I told him to leave go o' me," she added with wifely dignity. "Told him Joe Ed wouldn't like it. But he wouldn't listen. So I run out to Joe Ed, with it a-stormin' awful. He'd been a'bangin' on the roof, to warn Kirby, but he likely thought 'twas only the wind."

I gulped, racked with pity, and threw a glance at my friend.

"Then—?" Hettie prompted softly, in an odd tone. "You ran out into the yard? Kirby ran after you, and—?"

"And Joe Ed, he whanged him over the head," the girl finished, half apologetic, half proud, as any other woman might speak of a husband who had stoutly defended her honor. "He like to busted Kirby's skull wide open. But he hadn't ought to've tried to kiss me," she defended primly. "Ought he, Miss Hettie? And me a married woman with a young'ne!"

"No, dear," Hettie answered, in the gentlest voice I have ever heard her use. "No—Joe Ed did the right thing. I don't think Kirby was badly injured, but somebody has to look after his family while he's in the hospital. Did you go over and see his wife today?"

"Yes, ma'm," the girl said quietly. "But they wouldn't let me in. I reckon, on account they was scared. I mean, of Joe Ed. But he wouldn't hurt nobody less'n they was botherin' me or the baby! He's real good-hearted."

"Yes," my friend said softly. "I understand. Well—don't worry about it, dear. Next time Kirby will know better! I rather imagine," she chuckled, "that this experience will keep him sober for some time!"

The girl nodded shyly, and bent to pick up the child. But small Josie toddled away from her and ran around the great tree to where a low limb dipped almost to the ground.

"Pa!" she chirped suddenly, holding up her chubby arms to the giant oak. "Fing baby! Fing *high,* Pa!"

Florella laughed, shaking her head mildly and called: "No! *No,* now, Joe Ed—you're liable to drop that young'un! Don't ye—"

But as I stared, that low limb dipped down as under unseen pressure. The child, Josie, seized it and, as I gasped at the spectacle, was tossed ten feet off the ground, as if a gust of wind had blown the branch skyward; it had scooped up the baby, swinging her high above us. Then, as gently, it let her down again, while the young mother shook her head again in laughing reproof. My scalp crawled at her matter-of-fact, unself-conscious manner.

"Joe Ed's always a-doin' that," she said pleasantly. "She loves it. Why, Miss Hettie!" she broke off, pouting as I sidled pointedly back toward the gate, "I thought you-all would stay for dinner! Joe Ed caught me a rabbit, and I was just fixin' to fry it real nice and brown. Cain't ye stay?"

But I was out the gate and climbing into my car by that time, shaking my head covertly and beckoning for Hettie to come away. For some reason—which I will always firmly deny—my teeth were clicking like castanets. And I kept glancing up nervously at that tall spreading

oak tree, brooding over the little mountain cabin, and the woman and child who lived there alone.

Alone—?

"Pitiful case, isn't it?" Hettie murmured cheerfully, as she climbed into the car and waved good-bye to Florella Dabney—or "Mrs. Joseph Edward Jennings," as she was listed in the Welfare files. "I mean," my friend expanded, "the way that poor girl lives, with her baby. From hand to mouth, and the prey of—well, men like Kirby. She'd be so lonely and frightened if it weren't for that pathetic delusion of hers. And she's got the child to believing it now! Guess you noticed her swinging on that tree—she called it *'Pa!'* Mighty stout branch, to pick up a child that heavy, wasn't it?" she drawled carelessly. "Wind blew it, I guess—like the other night, when it whacked Kirby Marsh over the head. Awful windy up here on Old Baldy." She peeked at me slyly, lips twitching.

I glared at her and stepped on the gas, aware of the cold perspiration that had sprung out on my forehead. Because it was not windy. It was close and very still—and beside me, Hettie was chuckling softly as I glanced back at the barren little farm. Except for one low limb of that giant oak tree—again tossing that happy child playfully into the air while its mother looked on; lifting it gently, like a man's strong protective arms—not a leaf was stirring as far as we could see over the rugged mountainside.

TWISTER

Bob Clayton turned his head left and right to relax the tense muscles of his neck. He flexed fingers cramped from gripping the steering wheel, glanced sidewise at his wife huddled wearily in the car seat beside him. Slowing the small coupé to a standstill, he glanced at his wristwatch, then ahead at the darkening ribbon of highway.

"I knew we should have stopped at that last town! But no, you didn't like the motels, or the scenery, or . . . or . . . so now what? Pull up and spend the night under a tree . . . ?"

His wife made no reply, but continued to gaze fixedly at the white line illuminated by the twin spears of the headlights. She was much too tired to quarrel. . . .

Bob scowled. Tossing aside the road map, he trod viciously on the starter and drove on, with a jerk. Myra Clayton tactfully pretended not to hear his muttered profanity.

"Thirty more miles at least to Evansboro. That seems to be the next town on this God-forsaken stretch of. . . ." He broke off, ashamed of his ill temper. "Myra—darling. I hate the thought of spending our wedding night in a cheap tourist camp where . . . all sorts of things go on. But, if we come to one, shall I . . . ?"

Myra shook her head firmly. "No, please! I'd rather just. . . ."

"Okay." Bob smiled; reached over to pat the terrier in her lap. "Not very romantic, huh? Well. . . ." He shrugged. "You just take a nap, and I'll keep driving until we find a decent motel."

He sat back, with a stifled yawn, and concentrated on the highway. Under the pressure of his foot, the coupé leaped ahead through the gloom. Myra sighed wearily, and presently dozed, her hand resting lightly on the Scotty's head.

They drove on for what seemed hours. The whisper of tires on wet pavement and the clicking of the windshield wipers were hypnotic. Vapor rose from the hot concrete, giving everything a hazy, unreal quality. Bullfrogs kept up a dismal croaking from the roadside ditches, as though warning them of a nameless peril that followed close behind or lurked just ahead around the next curve.

The car braked suddenly. Myra sat up, blinking through the blurry windshield. An unreasoning apprehension chilled her, although the weather was pleasantly warm.

"Bob—? Wh-what is it?" she whispered. "An accident?" But his cheerful grin reassured her at once.

"It's a town," he announced. "Must be Evansboro. . . . Though I don't see how it could be; not this soon! By the map-gauge, it's a good thirty miles from that last. . . ."

The Scotty stirred; whined nervously. Myra straightened her blouse; patted her hair.

"Oh, good!" she sighed. "I'm *so* tired of driving—and I know you are, poor darling! Hope we can smuggle MacTavish in without an argument—he howls when he's left in the car!"

Dusk had fallen. Against the half-dark, shapes of houses loomed. There was no light in any of them; indeed, little illumination at all except for an occasional fork of lightning stabbing across the sky. The town seemed small; hardly more than a whistle-stop, with five or six houses and a few stores.

Bob inched the coupé forward at a snail's pace, peering out through the rain-misted window glass. The car lights had suddenly picked out a

weather-beaten sign, unlighted, hanging askew close to the roadside:

TOURISTS, it invited briefly, and Clayton braked the coupé, trying to make out the dark house beyond. Its vague bulk could be seen but dimly against the sky, Victorian in architecture, set far back from the highway.

Leaping out, head down in the drizzle, he strode up a grass-grown walk and knocked at the door with growing disfavor.

The place was extremely ill-kept. Wind whistled through a broken-out place in the colored glass of the door, and leaves and debris littered the rotting veranda.

No one answered Clayton's first knock. He was about to turn away, when a woman's figure appeared abruptly, coming around from the side porch, her footsteps making no sound, Clayton noticed, as did his own. Lightning picked out her ample form, clad in a dark dress of some kind, and her round white face framed by untidy gray hair. She did not offer any greeting; merely stood there, part of the darkness.

"We'd like a room for the night," Clayton began. "My wife and myself. I noticed your sign—you do take tourists, don't you?"

There was a long silence. The woman simply stood there, regarding him gravely. She turned her head, taking in the parked coupé, then looked slowly back at Clayton.

"No." Her voice startled him with its odd quality: high, vibrant, like the sound of wind blowing through a crack, and as toneless as that of a deaf-mute. "No," she repeated. "I don't take tourists any more. Not any more, no." She peered closer at him, eyes only dark holes in that white moon-face. "You're not—like us, are you?" she asked softly.

Clayton laughed, shook his head. "My Yankee accent, you mean? No, I'm from Chicago. We're just passing through. . . . Well—you say you don't take guests. I wonder if you'd direct me to the best hotel? We've been traveling since daybreak."

The woman continued to regard him silently. Then she shook her head.

"You won't like it at the hotel," she spoke, still in that hollow

toneless voice. "No accommodations anywhere in town, if you're—not used to things, like us. We don't take no strangers much here, anyhow."

Clayton stiffened, compressed his lips. "Indeed?" he snapped. "If it's a question of money, of course I intended paying in advance."

Wind stirred his hair, chilly with blown rain. Somewhere a shutter creaked and banged against the house. At the sound of it, the woman shivered and pressed against the wall.

"Pay in advance?" she echoed dully. "Oh—that! We don't worry about that around here any more." She laughed, a hollow mirthless sound. "You can stay here if you like, sure. But I'd drive on to the next town if I was you."

She stopped short, cringing like a whipped animal as another gust of wind shook the eaves. Sidling over to the porch rail, she peered anxiously up at the sky, clinging to a rotting pillar as if for support.

"Yes, yes!" she mumbled. "You'd better drive on, pretty fast! The wind is rising. Toward dawn it'll be roaring like a freight train. . . . Hear it? Hear it roaring in the distance?"

Clayton frowned, looking up at a forked display of lightning. "The wind?" he echoed, and laughed. "You've got keener ears than I have. All I can hear is rain on the roof."

The woman shook her head gravely. "You can hear it," she whispered dully, "if you really listen. You and your wife better be driving on before it's too late."

Clayton eyed her, quizzical. He shrugged, grinned. "Well—good night, then. Sorry to have disturbed you so late. I suppose we'll have to drive on anyway, if the accommodations here are so poor." He frowned at the sky, clearing now toward the west. "You really think there's a wind storm coming up? Those clouds don't look so very—"

The woman turned on him swiftly, shaking a gnarled finger. "You can't tell!" she whispered sharply. "That's just it! You can't ever tell what wind is liable to do. . . . I must close the shutters," her voice lowered to a mumble, and she scuttled around the side porch again. "Close the shutters, and put the garden chairs inside. . . ."

She was gone. Clayton took a step after her, then grinned, shrugged, and returned to his sleepy wife in the coupé.

"No dice, darling," he reported ruefully. "This Evansboro seems to be the jumping-off place. The old lady here advised me to drive on. Says there's a bad wind storm coming up—and us with no windshield wiper and only one headlamp! Better get that fixed if there's an all-night service station."

His wife sighed. "Well—whatever you say. . . . Oh, do sit still, MacTavish!"

The dog was pressing close to her now, shivering and whining nervously. All at once he lifted his muzzle and gave vent to a mournful howl. Clayton and his wife laughed, trying to quiet him.

"My sentiments exactly, pup!" Myra said wearily. "Well—better get some gas, too, darling. Looks like we're doomed to drive all night!"

They inched along between dark canyons of buildings half seen whenever the lightning flared. But the streets, on closer inspection, were not so deserted as they first appeared. Shadows moved here and there—dim human shapes. Faces looked out at them from the storefronts.

"Hmm," Clayton commented, "a few folks are still up and about after all, though I don't see how they find their way around. Confound these dark streets! Guess something must have happened to the electric current. Probably cut it off as a storm warning."

He leaned out the window, scanning the dark storefronts until at last the white shape of a filling-station slid into the radius of car light. Turning in, he pulled up beside a rusty gas pump, sounding his horn. Its raucous blare shattered the silence into a thousand eerie echoes, and abruptly, a lean sallow-faced youth appeared out of the darkness.

"Five gallons of twenty-cent gas," Clayton ordered. "And fix that headlight, will you?"

The man stared at him without speech, made no move to obey.

Clayton scowled at him. "Hurry up!" he snapped. "Five gallons."

The filling-station attendant blinked at him, nodded dully, and moved to the rear of the car. Something clanked and Clayton thought he could hear liquid gushing into the gas tank. Presently the lanky youth came around to the front again, shielding his eyes from the headlight's glare.

He stood there stupidly for a moment, poking at the lamp. Then:

"Mister, you got a short—I don't think I could fix it." His voice, like that of the old woman, was high, tremulous, and devoid of tone.

A gust of wind whistled through the car just then, rustling the road map in Clayton's hand. The filling-station attendant shuddered as it did so, staring up at the sky.

The rain had stopped, and a few stars were peeping out between the thinning clouds. But there was terror and apprehension on the youth's sallow face as he scanned the northwest horizon. His mouth jerked, Clayton saw, and his dull eyes were like the eyes of a drowning horse.

"Mister," he whispered, "you better get going! There's a twister blowing up. Hear it roaring through Logan's Pass? One minute you don't suspect a thing—and the next minute, it's on you! Just sweeps everything flat, and then it's gone again.... Hear it? Listen! It's coming!"

Clayton frowned, listening intently. There *was* a roaring sound in the distance, but it was accompanied by the wail of a train whistle. The night sky was clearing rapidly, and the remaining wispy clouds moved not at all as though wind-driven.

But Myra, straining her ears, was growing nervous. Animals, she recalled, are sensitive to weather-signs, and the dog in her lap was shivering violently. It bared its teeth at the serviceman in a way most unusual to its friendly disposition. Suddenly it gave vent to another howl, and dived for cover under their feet.

Bob Clayton fumbled for his billfold rather hurriedly, and extracted a dollar; held it out. The youth took it, hardly glancing at him, cavernous eyes fixed on the horizon. His face in the headlight's glow was pasty-white and distorted with terror, blind animal-terror that made Clayton's flesh crawl.

"Coming through Logan's Pass!" the youth mumbled. "It's headed this way; we're right in the path of it. . . . Mister, you better drive like the devil! Maybe you can outrun it—and maybe not."

Myra clutched at her husband's arm, trembling.

"Bob!" she whimpered. "This is tornado country! I—I'm scared! Hadn't we better leave the car and hunt a cyclone cellar?"

Clayton shook his head, stamped on the starter. "No, no, darling—we'd better run for it! Didn't you hear what this fellow said? This cursed town is directly in the path of a twister coming through Logan's Pass. . . . But what are you folks going to do?" he demanded, facing the terrified youth again. "Have you got cyclone cellars? Why don't you just evacuate the town?"

The thin-faced attendant stared at him dazedly, like a child in the path of an oncoming truck. "We can't do that—this is our home," he said dully. "And running away won't help, anyhow. A twister moves too fast. If it—if it wants you, it gets you, and that's all there is to it. There's no escape—no escape for anybody."

Clayton snorted. Under his hand, the gears clashed and the coupé swung into the highway again. Sweat beaded his forehead, but he smiled reassurance at his young bride.

"Don't worry, darling," he laughed. "We'll be miles away before any wind storm blows up around here. Even if—if it catches us, we can drive the car into a deep ditch and have perfect protection."

Stepping hard on the gas, he drove off with a haste that belied his calm exterior. The shapes of buildings straggled out, then merged swiftly into treetops as they left the little town behind.

Clayton crouched over the steering wheel, gas feed jammed to the floor. The coupé lunged, skidded, rocked crazily, held to the road only by the skill of its driver.

Myra Clayton huddled in her seat corner, wide-eyed and hugging the terrier in her arms. Now and then she glanced fearfully at the sky, almost clear now and studded with stars. Her ears ached from listening for an ominous roaring above the purr of the engine. But no such terrifying sound broke the peaceful stillness of the countryside.

Her husband was listening for it, too, neck muscles tense with apprehension. Destruction, doom, from out of the sky! Flattening everything in its path. If they could not outrun it. . . .

The coupé sputtered without warning. Clayton pulled at the choke, stared at the gas gauge in horror. It measured "Empty." With a second cough the car jerked to a halt, and the engine died.

"Out of gas!" Clayton exploded. "Why, we can't be! I just got five gallons back there in Evansboro. Oh, Lord!" he groaned. "Miles from nowhere, a tornado coming—and this had to happen! Darling, we'll have to push it into that ditch, and—just pray."

He leaped out, cursing. Myra Clayton, clinging to the Scotty, climbed out after him.

"Oh, Bob," she whimpered, "what are we going to—*oh!*"

She screamed suddenly, flinging herself into her husband's arms as, unheralded, a tall gaunt figure looked out of the darkness, blinding them with a powerful flashlight.

Clayton's blood froze. He cursed himself for leaving his gun in the glove compartment; wondered wildly if he dared make a dive for it, when:

"Howdy, folks," the man with the torch greeted pleasantly, in the mountain twang of the area. "Y'all know you only got one light?"

Clayton breathed out a gusty laugh of relief as the man came closer, revealing the glint of a deputy sheriff's badge on his overall front.

"Thank heavens!" he burst out. "Listen, sheriff—you've got to help us get away from here! There's a twister headed this way! They just told us about it when we drove through Evansboro."

The lawman leaned against the car deliberately, unshaved face calm and humorous in the reflected light.

"Young feller," he drawled, "I got my orders to run in every drunk driver I come acrost. I smell liquor on your breath—and you're sure talking wild enough. Evansboro is fourteen mile on up the road from here. And if there'd been any storm warnin' in this country, I'd a-been the first to hear of it."

Clayton's jaw dropped, then shut with a snap.

"Now, see here," he clipped out, "I had one drink—yes, one!—right after dinner in Silver City four hours ago. As for the twister, two people in Evansboro—or whatever town we just came through—warned us it was coming through Logan's Pass."

The sheriff chuckled, jerking a thumb at the stars. "Out o' that clear sky?" He snorted. "Young feller, the last bad wind we had through here was in '34. And February and March is the months for 'em, not July. If you ain't drunk, you're crazy—because the last town you strike before you get to Evansboro on this highway is Saltersburg, twenty-odd mile back where you come from."

Myra moved close to her husband, mouth open in indignation.

"That's ridiculous!" she exploded. "We stopped in Saltersburg for cigarettes almost an hour ago. Don't you stand there and try to tell us we didn't come through another little town just a few miles back! I—"

The deputy eyed her and spat carefully. He looked over his glasses at Clayton, then rather sadly shook his head.

"I got to lock you both up," he announced apologetically. "The way you was hellin' . . . pardon, ma'm . . . comin' down the highway! Then you stop right sudden and start gabbin' about a twister and a town that don't exist. Y'all ain't in no fit state for night-drivin', ma'm, for a fact."

Clayton was bristling now. Weariness and the harrowing events just past had frayed his temper to the snapping-point. He took a step forward, fist clenched. But his wife caught his arm.

"Wait, dear," she said evenly. "This gentleman seems to doubt our word, but I'm sure we can convince him. Officer, if you'll let us have some gas, we'll be glad to drive you back and show you the town we went through. But—tomorrow, please, after the tornado strikes. I have no desire to be blown through a tree tonight—even if we were drunk, which we're not."

The deputy stood erect again, sweeping off his greasy hat with some embarrassment. Clayton grinned. The fellow was evidently a moron of the lowest order, and Myra was handling him the only way possible. Now he gave her an apologetic nod of contrition.

"Sorry, ma'm; you can't alluz tell, you know." He coughed. "As to the gas, I'll sell you some, right enough; there's a can up at the house. But—honest, there ain't no town between Saltersburg and Evansboro. Not even a tourist camp. You look on your road map while I go after your gas."

He turned and vanished into the night again. Clayton glowered after him, then deliberately pulled a stack of road maps from the glove compartment. There was among them, he recalled, a special state map. Almost every anthill along the highway was marked on it, and a town as big as the one they had just left would surely be included.

But, frowning over the local map a moment later, he shook his head, puzzled and chagrined. There was no sign of a town marked along the route between the two cities.

"This beats me," he murmured, then scanned the sky apprehensively. "No wind storm yet. They couldn't have been kidding us, could they? No, no, two separate people—and they both looked terrified, saying they could hear the wind roaring in the distance. But look at that sky; there's certainly no sign of a twister around here."

A few minutes later, when the deputy sheriff had filled their tank with gas, Clayton faced him sheepishly.

"Look," he said. "I paid a dollar for gas back at that town there; I'll prove it to you if you ride back with us. It can't have been more than five miles. Besides, I have a few words to say to that filling-station attendant. They'll gyp you a gallon or two sometimes if you don't watch—but we wouldn't have given out of gas if he'd put in any at all! Probably some vagrant pulling a fast one on me with a locked pump." He grinned. "Maybe you'll make your arrest tonight after all, Sheriff."

The deputy spat again, and rested one foot on the rear bumper.

"Won't tomorrow do?" he drawled. "Your wife here looks mighty sleepy; and we got a extry room. You can sleep there tonight, and we'll drive back and nab your gas-chiseling feller right after breakfast."

Clayton smiled, and nodded at once.

"Sounds wonderful," he laughed. "I'm so tired, I don't know my

own name, and my wife is worn out, I know. Mind our having the pup with us?''

''Nope, not a bit,'' their benefactor assured them. ''House is up the hill a piece; I'll show you. But say, young feller; that stuff about a twister coming through Logan's Pass—why, who'd a-told you that? Must have been an old-timer funnin' with you. Since the Government blasted for water-power ten years ago, one side of the Pass has been leveled flat. Don't hardly anybody remember it was ever there.''

He climbed into the car, shaking his head, and pointed the way up a narrow byroad off the highway, at the end of which a white clapboard farmhouse perched on the hilltop.

After breakfast next morning they piled into the coupé again and headed back down the highway. The fresh green of the vegetation looked innocent and peaceful. A clear blue sky brightened as the sun rose, cloudless and serene after the rain.

''Twister!'' the sheriff snorted, grinning in good-natured derision at Clayton and his wife as they rolled along. ''Somebody sure is a practical joker in this town of yours, selling you fake gas and what-all!''

Clayton said nothing, but his eyes met those of his wife curiously. Half the night they had lain awake, puzzling about the town that was not on any road map and the wind storm that had not materialized.

Watching the milometer, Clayton looked ahead, and suddenly pointed in triumph. ''There! Here's our town! I knew we couldn't have imagined—'' He broke off, staring, a little pulse beginning to throb at his temple.

''Good Lord!'' he breathed. ''I can't believe it!''

For the rows of buildings along the highway as he slowed down could hardly be called buildings at all. Crumbling shells of moss-covered brick loomed against the sky, desolate and inhabited only by nesting birds. The shattered hulks of old houses, sometimes no more than one rotting wall or a vine-hidden chimney, reared from foundations overgrown with grass and weeds.

In front of one swung a battered sign Clayton remembered. TOURISTS, it read—but the house beyond had no top story. It was torn off as if by the hand of an angry giant. No one could have lived inside—no one but kindred of the spider and the bat. There was no sign of an old woman with a round white face, scraggly gray hair, and terror-dilated eyes. Dust lay undisturbed on the rotting porch, save where a man's footprints had mounted the steps and come down again.

"That's—" Clayton's voice was strangled, his face blank with unbelief—"that's where I—it can't be!"

His dazed eyes swept the one-street town where not a house, not a building stood which was not smashed beyond reasonable repair. The giant's hand had swept across the entire village, battering, smashing, destroying as if in one brutal gesture.

Parts of other buildings lay in front yards. One small outhouse hung half in, half out of a gaping hole in the wall of a crumbling Colonial mansion. A great oak, jerked out of the earth like a blade of grass, lay through the center of a crushed bungalow.

The sheriff's guffaw startled Clayton from his trance.

"Oh! This is your town, eh? Why, it's been deserted for years, ever since the twister in '22."

"*Twister?*" Clayton swallowed with a dry mouth, and felt his wife's cold hand slide shakily into his own. "Did—did you say—?"

"Sure!" The deputy chortled. "But it wasn't last night, young feller—it was seventeen years ago! Worst we ever had, I recollect. Wiped out near everybody in the town here. The rest moved away, they couldn't afford to rebuild, and there wasn't much to hold 'em here, anyhow. Why, I just never thought about this place when y'all spoke about stopping at a town nearer than Evansboro! Nobody stops here, not even hoboes. Some dang-fool story about it being haunted. . . ."

Myra Clayton edged closer to her husband in the car seat, wide-eyed and silent. The dog in her lap whined softly.

"It's natural folks'd cook up some such tale," the sheriff was rambling on cheerfully. "When the twister struck here, nobody had

received any storm warnin', because the weather bureau didn't figger it'd be such a bad one. Freak wind in July, it was. Nobody was prepared for it, so of course hundreds was killed. Some of the unidentified bodies was buried on the spot. Too tore-up to sort out. . . . July the twelfth, 1922, that was," he drawled, then grunted. "Say, that was exactly seventeen years ago yestiddy! Funny coincidence. . . ."

But Bob Clayton was not listening. He had turned the coupé and was cruising back down the highway to where a white stucco filling-station squatted forlornly between the wreckage of two stores. Slowly he braked the car and climbed out. Slowly, not daring to look at his wife, he walked up the drive-in and paused beside the rusty gas pump—empty and hoseless by daylight. He knew, somehow, what he would find there. Bending down, he picked it up with an unsteady hand. . . .

A dollar bill. The dollar bill he had laid in the palm of a pale youth with a deathless terror in his hollow eyes: terror beyond the peace of the grave, terror that had neither let him, nor hundreds of others in that lost town, rest since a yellowish cloud had roared down upon them from the sky almost a score of years before. Waiting, all of them, in a terrible bondage of dread, for the twister to strike again.

A HANDFUL OF SILVER

It was Christmas Eve and snowing hard when I dropped into Joe's Bar and Grill after deadline time and found a stool at the counter. Joe, bald and smiling his gold-toothed smile, tipped me a nod.

"Evening, Mary. The usual glass of port?"

"No, make it a hot rum punch tonight, Joe. Whoo, *boy,* what weather!"

I grinned back at him, shivering and beating my numb hands together. My packages, in a leaning tower on the floor beside me, tilted suddenly and collapsed against the leg of the customer on the next stool.

"Sorry," I said.

I righted them with an apologetic smile at the man hunched beside me—shabby, bearded, gaunt, and wracked by a cough. He bent to retrieve one package that had bounced from my grasp, and I caught a glimpse of piercing black eyes deep-sunk in shadowed sockets. The mouth half-hidden in the black beard was both severe and sensual. His narrow hooked nose caught my attention, as well as his marked accent. Italian? Lebanese? I could not place it.

But something about the slumped shoulders, the toneless despair in

the stranger's voice, prompted me to add, impulsively, "Merry Christmas!"

He turned toward me with startling abruptness, recoiling as though I had struck him. Such misery burned from those dark eyes, I caught my breath audibly, as one might at sight of an open wound. He did not reply to my pleasantry, but merely stared for a moment, then turned back to his half-empty glass. Finishing his drink with a gulp, he moved to a nearby, recently vacated booth, with a manner less of rebuff than of humility.

He sat down wearily, gestured for another drink, and presently pulled out a small, dirty leather pouch with a draw-string. Opening it, he dumped its contents—a handful of small silver coins—on the tabletop and began to count them. In the sudden silence as the jukebox ended its chant of "Silver Bells," I overheard him mumble.

"Shanee, sh'leeshee, rve'e, chameeshee. . . ."

Hebraic, I noted idly. Some miserly old pawn-shop proprietor counting out his day's receipts. Incuriously, I glanced at the hoard, and my interest quickened.

I had not been a numismatist for years without learning to recognize a rare coin when I saw one. And these, all sixteen or seventeen of them, were both rare and extremely old. They were all alike. Their shape was roughly oval, their polished silver marred either by a dark reddish-brown stain or some sort of alloy in the metal. Peering at them more intently, I made out the likeness of a chalice on one; on another, the reverse side, that of a flowering lily. They were shekels, struck perhaps in the reign of Herod.

Burning eyes glanced up from the little pile and caught my stare. I looked away, embarrassed. Then, still with a friendly impulse born of the Christmas season, I turned to him again.

"You a coin-collector?" I asked. "Nice hobby. I have a pretty fair collection myself—mostly half-dimes and Liberty nickels. If you'd like to see it sometime—I mean," I nodded at Joe, watching us laconically, as he polished a shot-glass. "You a regular customer? I drop in every evening. Live around here?"

"No. No, I . . . travel," the bearded man murmured rather nervously. With one skeletal hand he raked the coins back into their pouch without offering to show them.

But one rolled off the tabletop and came to rest at my feet. I picked it up and handed it back. As our fingers touched, I noticed that the stranger's hand was colder than mine—a hard, unyielding cold, like steel, or the hand of a corpse. Involuntarily I drew back—and saw, from the expression in those hollow dark eyes, that the stranger had not missed my reaction. The thin, unnaturally red lips curled slightly in a tired smile, almost as though he had expected my revulsion.

Then his eyes softened. They traveled from my ringless left hand to my obviously pregnant waistline. Gently, without embarrassment, he murmured, "You're not in need, are you?—In trouble?"

"Me?" A smile touched my lips.

Joe, less tactful, burst out laughing. "Mary, an unwed mother? That's a hot one!" He guffawed. "Wait'll I tell Johnny!"

"Joe, knock it off!" I smiled at the bearded man. "No, I'm just another working wife. Newspaper gal. Working as long as I dare, that is—to get the car and the TV set paid for, before the launching! My husband's a sports writer on the same paper. We've been married only a year. My rings," I added, "are in hock so we could buy an antique crib!" I turned to Joe. "Has my lord and master been in here tonight? And *did* you tell him to pick up that turkey we won in the raffle?"

Joe nodded. "Sure thing, Mary. He's got it and gone home. Prob'ly has it in the oven by now if he—*Hey, Bub!*" He broke off, smile vanishing. "You forgot to pay for that last drink!"

The bearded man had started for the snowy street, head down once more, shoulders slumped in a posture of dull defeat. Seen from the rear, his neck revealed an odd-looking red scar. Joe, noticing it also, punched me.

"Looka *that!*" he whispered. "Looks like our pal was guest-of-honor at a lynchin' party!"

"Yeah," I gasped. "Rope-burn?"

"Sorry. I forgot." The man turned back to clink a fifty-cent piece on

the counter. Then, with a wry smile at me—friendly, if it had not been so bitterly ironic—he started for the street door again.

It burst open before he could reach for the knob, and a "blind" beggar blew in with a gust of snowy wind. His pencils and tin cup were clutched in an expensively gloved hand, and the eyes faintly visible behind the dark glasses sized up the sentimental atmosphere of the place with an expert glance.

"Help the blind! Help the blind!" he intoned mechanically.

The bearded man halted. With a peculiar, hurried eagerness he pulled out the leather pouch and dropped several of those rare, certainly valuable oval coins into the beggar's cup with a musical clink of metal on metal. A burning look of hope flared in the black eyes—to die almost at once as the beggar fished out the coins, felt them, bit one, and then threw them contemptuously to the floor.

"Wise guy, huh?" he whined. "Try'n a palm off some worthless foreign money on a poor, handicapped fella. You got no shame at all, Mister?"

Light ebbed from the bearded man's eyes. With infinite weariness he stooped to retrieve his scorned donation. One coin lay half-under a booth table, winking in the red and green Christmas lights like an evil eye. Perhaps it was only a trick of the light, but the dark stain seemed to have spread fractionally across its shiny surface. He returned them all to the pouch before getting heavily to his feet and heading again for the door.

Pity surged up in me for what had obviously been a fumbling attempt to do a kindness, first to me, then to the ungrateful beggar.

"Hey, Mister—wait a minute!" I called after him. Then, as he looked over his shoulder, startled, I added, "I wonder if you'd sell me one of those coins. If I'm not mistaken, they're museum pieces—first-century shekels? Probably struck in Jerusalem, maybe two thousand years ago or earlier?"

The piercing eyes met mine with a force like a physical shock. Some deep gnawing hunger in their depths made me step back involuntarily, almost fearful of their burning eagerness. I regretted my impulse, but went on:

"My husband and I are both coin-collectors. If it isn't too expensive, could I buy one for him? Sort of an extra gift, to tie on to our Christmas tree . . . ?"

At mention of the season, the gaunt stranger winced visibly. Such a look of pain contorted his mouth and heavy eyebrows that I was taken aback. A faint groan issued from him, so very faint that it was just audible. The twisting lips compressed themselves in a tight line. Eyes closed, the stranger seemed to fight for self-control. When he spoke, though, his voice was steady, but breathless with a peculiar tone of eagerness.

"These coins are not to be sold. But I will *give* you one! Gladly, *Please!* Take it. The . . . the stain will go away. . . ."

With desperate haste, he clawed out the leather pouch and extracted one of the silver pieces. He held it out to me with a trembling hand.

"Sorry, no." I laughed. "Give my husband an expensive antique that a strange man gave to me? You don't know my Johnny!" Then, as the hand proffering the coin sagged wearily: "But it would be a favor if you'd let me buy it. I know what a coin shop or museum would charge for such a rare piece. Ten dollars?" I fumbled with the catch of my handbag. "I know it's worth much more, but that's all I can afford."

The eager look had vanished from the black eyes. He shook his head dully. "You don't understand. These coins must be spent, used, given as a kindness, accepted with gratitude and without suspicion. A kindness without reward. . . ."

"I see." With a shrug I turned back to my hot rum punch.

Joe and I exchanged grimaces. Was the fellow some sort of cultist or religious crank? The big city is full of such, though their hidden motive is usually financial gain. I waited cynically for the stranger to boost his price. Instead, with an audible sigh, he moved again toward the street door.

A small boy of perhaps nine entered, brushing snow from a jacket too thin for the temperature outside. His face was red with cold, but he grinned at Joe as he thrust a wadded bill across the counter, revealing bruises like fingermarks on his thin wrist.

"Bourbon?" grunted Joe, like one repeating an old routine.

The boy nodded. Joe thrust the pint into a paper sack, rang up the sale, and went back to polishing glasses. The boy was gazing admiringly at the blinking Christmas lights and the small tree repeated in the bar mirror.

"Hey, it looks all right in here! Real *neat!*"

Joe smiled wryly. "You gonna get that camera for Christmas this year, Danny?—The one you been wantin', in the hockshop window?"

"Aw, I dunno." The boy laughed, shrugging cheerfully. "You know my ole man. 'Specially 'round Christmas and New Year's. Most of the time, though, he's okay," he added loyally. "Maybe he jist gets to missin' Mom."

"Sure." Joe nodded.

"He might even remember about the camera, though. He just might."

The boy started out, pulling up his jacket collar before facing the blizzard building up outside. Snow banked against the plate-glass window, making a dark mirror for the room. It reflected the bearded man's face as he hesitated at the door. Hope had flared once more in his haunted eyes.

"Boy?" He scrabbled hastily in the leather pouch and brought out a few of the oval coins. "Would you like a little money for yourself? Or for a present for your father?"

The urchin halted, eyeing the silver warily. "For doin' what?" he demanded, suspicious of the bearded man's over-eager expression. "Lissen—I ain't carrying no package for no *pusher!* Uh-*uh,* Mister. I ain't about to spend Christmas in no *juv court!*"

He brushed past the old man, almost rudely, and darted out into the snowy street, hugging his father's purchase. Again a look of bitter grief welled up in the old man's black eyes.

He leaned wearily against the door; a tear glistened in his dark beard. Then he started back as someone outside heaved at the portal blocked by his weight. It was flung angrily open, and a boozy blonde of middle age flounced in out of the cold.

"What's-a big idea? A gennelman would *open* the door for a lady."

She glared at the bearded man, then changed her expression to one of kittenish charm as she turned to Joe. "Merry Christmas, you old whiskey-cutter! I just couldn't pass by without droppin' in."

Joe eyed her without cordiality. "No more hustlin' in here, Mae! I warned you last time. *Out!*" He jerked his thumb at the door through which she had entered. "You wanna get me closed down?"

"Well, I *never* been so insulted!" The blonde drew herself up, then winked. "All I want is a little drink. On the house, huh? One little teensy one? It's Christmas! Look, I brought you a present!" With a flourish, she laid a small hand-towel on the counter; it was baldly labeled "Central Hotel."

"Awright," Joe said. "One drink. Make it fast!"

"You're all heart, Joey boy. Here's mud in your eye."

The blonde backed toward the exit. The bearded man, with a gesture that held no mockery, opened the door for her. But as she shivered in the blast of wind from the street, his eyes shone once more with hope. Clawing out the pouch, he took out two coins and offered them.

"May I buy you a bottle? Or dinner, if you're hungry?" His voice shook like the bony hand holding out the silver.

Something about his blazing eyes repelled the blonde. Her kittenish smile vanished. She glared from the silver to the cavernous eyes. Abruptly she drew back, shaking her head.

"You got TB or something? Lissen—you can't buy no time with *me*—not for no lousy beer and maybe a hamburger. Let me *outa* here! I got a big date for later."

Chin up, she stalked out into the snowy night.

The bearded man, his hand still held out, slumped against the closing door. In the stillness, broken only by subdued traffic-sounds and the monotonous jingle of a street-Santa's bell, I thought I heard him sob aloud. The old man stared at the oval coins on his palm with utter despair in his eyes—they were almost solid brown now, with little of the silver gleaming. His skeletal fingers closed over them, and his head fell back against the door, revealing again that raw red scar circling his neck. His lips writhed; I could hear the words now. . . .

"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani. . . ."

And with shocking clarity, I recalled their source. Another Man had spoken those words in His extremity—a prayer, a last cry of agony, by one dying, nailed to a wooden cross on a hill called Golgotha. . . .

With unwonted fellowship, Joe called out suddenly, "Hey, Bub—you care for another drink? On the house? You don't look so good."

The old man seemed not to have heard. Eyes tortured, he poured the rejected coins back into his pouch, counting soundlessly. Then, with a sigh like a chill wind through the branches of a bare tree, he flung open the street door and plunged into the night.

"Well, how about that?" Joe growled. "What a kook! Tryin' to give them foreign coins away one minute, and the next, refusin' to sell you one! And him with a whole sackful! How many of them things could he have been needin', now, for his own use?"

I sat silent for a moment, gulping the last of my hot punch. A chill far more penetrating than the icy wind outside made me shiver; I longed for the comforting familiarity of the little flat my husband and I shared.

"How many? Oh, about thirty, I'd say, to buy what *he* needs." I thought of Biblical verses remembered from childhood: " '*. . . repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying: I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent. And they said: What is that to us? See thou to that. . . .*' "

Joe came around the bar, concerned. "What're you talkin' about, Mary?"

" '*And he cast down the pieces of silver, and . . . went and hanged himself . . . !*' Even the grave rejected him, Joe. He's still walking the earth, trying to buy back his soul! Joe, *we've just met the Wandering Jew!*"

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moonlight-lumined leaves of a great whiteoak. An old Civil War legend is summoned in "The Shot-Tower Ghost" to create a modern macabre shocker in which a wager is kept from beyond the grave. "Parasite Mansion" reveals a preternatural presence that lingers malignly within the centuried recesses of a decaying plantation residence, while in "Twister" a small Southern town is eternally condemned to a daemonic curse of dread and doom. Also represented in this collection is Miss Counselman's greatest single effort, "Seventh Sister," ostensibly a tale of voodoo in the Old South, but which presents the tragedy of an albino Negro girl with such ineffable poignancy and artistic restraint as to comprise a masterpiece of weird fantasy.

The spirit world has been associated with Christmas Eve through a long tradition of European folklore, and HALF IN SHADOW thus concludes with a modern Christmas ghost story, "A Handful of Silver." In this work, as with much of her uncanny fiction, Mary Elizabeth Counselman possesses the ability to embody large areas of human experience in quasi-symbolic, quasi-mythic form. Her weird tales rooted in the lore and legendry of the American South attain a timeless significance through this author's sensitive and compassionate probing into the darksome side of human nature. The revenants, wraiths, and other crepuscular creatures of these stories exist but half in shadow—we bring them out into the open and behold a disembodied image of ourselves.

MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN (1911–) was born in Birmingham and later moved to Gainesville, Georgia where her father was a faculty member at the Riverside Military Academy. Miss Counselman attended the University of Alabama and Montevallo University, and soon began placing her short stories and poetry with *Weird Tales, Collier's,* the *Saturday Evening Post,* and other magazines. The author resides today in Gadsden, Alabama with her husband, Horace B. Vinyard, and a large entourage of cats.

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